

Science Fantasy

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FRANK BRANDON

Perilous Portal

**MICHAEL
MOORCOCK**

Kings In Darkness

COLIN DENBIGH

Hat Trick

STEVE HALL

Beginner's Luck



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Frank Brandon's long novelette, "The Seventh Stair," in No. 49, very obviously required a sequel but we did not expect to wait quite so long for it. Here then, is what happened to the boys of the Armoured Div when they went into Watkins' World.

PERILOUS PORTAL

BY FRANK BRANDON

o n e

The bulky manilla envelope containing my application for a passport to another world barely squeezed through the slit of the letter box. I pushed harder. It held for a moment against my fingers, then dropped out of sight. I heard it thump inside the box. Inexplicably a breeze of unease swept through my mind, that strange vague feeling that a simple act presages disaster.

Perhaps it is merely hindsight ; when the damage has been done you hark back to the moment of its inception and imagine you experienced that shiver of prophetic apprehension.

In the street outside my flat the first gush of spring weather had brought out early shoppers, the stir and bustle of London life pulsed happily all around me, the window boxes of the pub on the corner glowed yellow and cerise and orange. Further along, the Underground entrance showed a black trellis against sunlight—that damned Underground !

"Excuse me, mate—got to get the pools off."

A friendly, beefy man pushed past towards the letter box. I moved away, smiled without meaning.

Outside the Underground entrance I'd lost count of the hours I'd spent, just standing there, waiting for Alan Watkins and the lads of the old armoured div to surge back up the steps, still laughing and shouting, perhaps, after all this time, still skylarking, bringing with them the trophies of their stay in another world, bringing back Alan himself, out of a world of jungle and fearsome beasts long buried in the detritus of Earth's prehistoric past.

Draped in weapons and safari supplies they'd run excitedly down those steps—and left me behind. Left me standing stupidly there to be arrested just because I didn't understand maths. Well—well I'd just completed my course and all I needed now was the assurance that I, too, could comprehend Alan Watkins' equations—those devilish equations that opened the Seventh Stair to another world.

Alan had been in and out of his world a number of times, proving that what he said was true. He'd dried into a grey ghost of himself doing it. But—why hadn't the rescue party come out? What terrible fate kept them there, wherever *there* was?

Back in the flat I ambled aimlessly, that little itch of irritation, of unease, prickling away at the back of my mind.

The phone rang. Today was Charlie Hawtrey's turn to keep tabs on me.

"You still okay, Phil?"

"Yes. Feeling let down, dunno why."

"When the blazes are you going to pass that flaming exam of yours? Let us into the secret?"

"My brain was designed for loftier aims than fiddling with figures—"

"Hah! Look, remember Buster Anderson—"

"Anderson—Buster, of course! The only character with a spare track pin when I threw a track outside Derna. Cost me a bottle of beer, that track pin."

"He's just flown in from Canada. Can't believe that Alan and Steve Searles and Tony Ufton and Jock McTaggart and all the rest have disappeared. Wants to join the party."

"Good. The more the merrier. How are the supplies coming along?"

Charles Hawtrey may have been in a shady arms business ; but after our friends had disappeared, including Punchy Draycott, the contacts man, Hawtrey had come up trumps. He was one of the new group, now ; supplies chief.

"Fine. Just fine. Everybody wants to go after our missing pals, you know that, Phil. But when I tell 'em they'll have to wait until you know maths—and that they'll have to brush up their own—well, you can imagine the names they call me."

"Listen, Charlie," I said, seriously, "I'll explain everything. But, in case I disappear—that's why one of you must ring every day—you'll find a letter here with a complete explanation. I want you to believe what it says, although you'll think I'm a lunatic. But I'm not, Charlie, and neither was Alan Watkins."

"Righto, old boy. I'm not questioning your nut condition!"

I rang off. Just in case I'd grasped the meaning of Alan's equations without realising it I went everywhere carrying my precautions.

Pretty futile precautions they were, too, I suppose. A single Colt forty-five automatic and a sheath knife against what Alan himself had called *Tyrannosaurus*—as big as a Churchill and as fast as a Honey.

Futile, perhaps ; but reassuring, too. I'd read Watkins' equations that opened up the Seventh Stair from this old Earth into—into another Earth where heat blasted and rotting jungle smells stank ; and where a human voice called desperately for help. I'd read those equations and failed to understand them ; but my friends of the old armoured div, seeking for fun and to rescue Alan, had trooped into that strange world armed with bazookas and beer, tommyguns and tucker, out for a lark, going on an almighty binge.

They hadn't come back.

The rest of the day passed drably. About ten o'clock I decided to have another tussle with abstruse figures and turned out the books and papers. Copies of the papers I'd returned to my tutor that morning promised a starting off point and I settled down to mental agony.

A loose paper clip slipped from the papers and fell to the floor. I picked it up, tossed it into a corner of the desk ; but that prickle of unease tantalised the back of my skull like a tickling feather.

As often before the caustic red-scribbled notes from my tutor, sarcastic little jabs scrawled alongside my painstaking,

fumbling work, annoyed me. Oh, the tutor knew his stuff, all right. The correspondence college picked good men. But I was well aware that my tutor considered I possessed a bird brain with the aptitude for maths of a fingerless amoeba.

In a gesture that had become habitual I patted my inside breast pocket where Watkins' equations, copied on his own typewriter from his carbon papers, lay snugly between protective plastic wrapping. I'd made three copies. One I kept always in my pocket. The other was appended to the letter to Charles Hawtrey and the gang that they would read only if I disappeared. The other set I'd had out last night as I'd finished up my task, checking on some of the symbols Watkins had used, beginning to grasp what he was getting at.

And then the meaning of my day long unease shocked into my brain like the blast of an eighty eight.

Papers spilled to the floor, cabinets were ripped open, the safe degutted, the wastepaper basket upended over the floor; frantically I searched every possible and impossible nook and cranny.

At last I sagged back in the chair, beaten. I had to acknowledge the unpalatable truth that I was a criminal moron.

The third set of equations was missing.

And I knew those deadly equations now were safely in the hands of the G.P.O. on the way to my correspondence college.

What to do?

The G.P.O. wouldn't give up a packet entrusted to their care to anyone except the addressee. All I could do—apart from ~~course~~ myself—was to be on the doorstep of the correspondence college when it opened the following morning. I was. They were very helpful at the big white office block—very modern and sharp-cornered—in Central London, from the commissionaire, through the receptionist to a fusty little man with a wisp of grey hair and gold rimless glasses.

"Ah—yes, I see." He didn't. I knew that. "But our tutors are not resident here. They are mostly part time employees, and we send everything to them—"

"A. M. Gilbert," I said. "What's his address?"

"I'm not at all sure we should divulge—professional etiquette—what is your reason—?"

I leaned across his shining and empty desk. "Look. I want that address. I want it now. If you obstruct me I shall hold you personally responsible for the tragedy that will follow!"

He crumbled. I didn't feel particularly proud of myself ; but nothing mattered beside the urgency of getting those confounded equations back before A. M. Gilbert—he of the acid red-ink comments—read them and took a stroll downstairs. A card was produced from a filing cabinet.

“A. M. Gilbert, Links Cottage, Little Fallow, Kent.”

“Thanks.” He stared up as I tossed the card down. I'd already forgotten the little man. Kent. Oh, well, it made a nice change from sooty old London.

The spring morning opened fresh and full of promise as the car hurled south eastwards. She ran sweetly that morning with a jocular bouncy feel about her that lent a joy to driving. Lying under the rug on the back seat, together with a bandoleer, a pair of field glasses and a Pakhtun knife, the three-oh-three express rifle with sniper's telescopic sight gave me a false sense of security. I'd been the biggest fool this side of Alan Watkins' world and all the guns in Christendom wouldn't atone for that.

The Ordnance Survey unreeled in time with the passing procession of villages. The roads narrowed down and the soft brilliance of spring blossom covered with snow and fire the swelling flanks of low hills. Oast houses coned the horizon. The air smelt clean. If the object of this hurtling journey hadn't been so grim and terrifying I would have relaxed, thoroughly enjoyed this country jaunt.

At the road fork where, the map said, I should turn off the main road a signpost stood with two arms knocked off. They'd been propped up against the pole. No one seemed to mind. A few hundred yards further along with a private wood on one side and hopfields the other, the Kent County notice said : “LITTLE FALLOW.” I drove on and stopped at the first inn. Next door to the inn stood another inn. Across the village green a church that was old when Crusaders crossed their feet to be buried there rose, sun-washed amber, in the light. A leaning fronted general shop twinkled tiny windows at me as I dismounted and bundled into the inn.

“Links Cottage?” The Landlord, stout and ferocious of aspect with a gold watch chain that might have moored the Queen Elizabeth, quizzed me speculatively. “Take the Snorden Road, hundred yards over the bridge. Can't miss it—”

I was outside again, the starter whirring, before the landlord finished.

Links Cottage stood where he'd said. The car fairly took off over the little humpbacked bridge across a stream tinkling and burbling over round brown stones. Even then, in the hurly burly of rushing to prevent a disaster, I couldn't help noticing and feeling good about that cottage. On a Christmas card it would have looked right ; here, in its natural setting of Old English Garden, mossy wall, low sweeping trees, it looked marvellous.

I hammered brutally on the door.

Some time elapsed with me fidgeting impatiently and banging again on the grained grey wood, before a pleasant-featured old countryman, his white hair gleaming in the sunlight, mild eyes turned up to me curiously, opened the door and said : " That's quite a commotion you're creating there, young feller."

I opened my mouth to answer. Before I could speak a word a narrow lattice window flew open above the doorway and a head crowned with flaming luxuriant hair poked through. I caught a single glimpse of a pale face, huge eyes and a pallid mouth—a mouth that opened and poured heartless abuse upon me.

" What the blue blazes is going on down there ? You ! Ruffian, disturber of the peace ! Clear off and sell your confounded brushes elsewhere !"

The window slammed shut with a violence that dislodged ancient mortar. The old man hunched his shoulders and smiled at me with the tolerance of understanding age.

" That's my grand-daughter. Don't take too much notice of her, young feller. Always flies off the handle if she's disturbed."

" I'm not selling brushes. Does A. M. Gilbert live here ?"

" Might. What d'you want, son, if you're not selling something ?"

" I want to talk to A. M. Gilbert ! And pretty damned quick ! It's urgent—a matter of life and death."

Those words were used deliberately ; a corny line that might be strong enough to jolt this stolid countryman into action. He regarded me shrewdly from under puckered eyelids, then nodded and jerked a thumb skywards.

" Upstairs. You'd best go up. But duck when you go in, first door. You've been warned."

" Thanks, pop," I said and raced up the narrow, panelled staircase that smelt of rich wax polish. The first door was shut. I didn't knock.

"What the—! Of all the infernal nerve!" She picked up a hefty volume from the plain table and hurled it accurately. I ducked. After all—I'd been warned.

"Sorry," I said, lifting my head warily. "I must have got it wrong. I'm looking for Mr. A. M. Gilbert."

"Who? No character by that name lives here—did you say say Mister A. M. Gilbert?"

"Yes."

"We-ell—I don't know who you are, bursting into a lady's study like this. But I'm Miss A. M. Gilbert."

"Oh, no!"

"Now what's wrong? Look—tell me what you want or clear out. I heard you talking to my grandfather. A matter of life or death! Bosh! I'm not buying any more confounded encyclopedias. Got it?"

I took a deep breath. I smiled. It hurt.

"My dear young lady—"

"I'm not, thank God, your dear young lady. Get to the point without burbling. I've work to do." She snapped a brown finger at the papers on her table. "The nitwit who sent me this ought to meet you, you'd make a right pair."

They were the papers, all right. My papers. I told her so.

"You mean you're the imbecile who's been trying to fathom higher maths?" She cocked her head back. Her neck was very long and smooth, her chin small and round and very very determined. "Great Jumping Jehosaphat!" Then she laughed.

So long as she was still in the room I didn't mind her laughter. I walked across to the desk, ignoring her, rifled through the papers.

They were there.

t w o

Lying on top, creased up more than I recalled, and smothered with scorching red ink marks, question marks, exclamation points, lozenges, diamonds, vicious underlinings. Suddenly I smiled—a secret, nasty, triumphant little smile, all to myself.

She stopped laughing and said: "Yes! Go on, look. If those equations are your idea of the work I set you—"

"They're not."

"Well, why bother me with them, then?" She put her fists on her hips. I turned from the table, one hand resting on

Watkins' devilish equations, and looked at her. On this bright spring morning she wore an apple green blouse, light and airy, short sleeved, scallop-necked. Her trews clung tightly to her calves. Her face, devoid of make-up, had no power to move me—she possessed fine bone structure and good features but nothing that might attract a second look. Her body, taut in the blouse, promised; but her angry young woman personality blazed through and rendered physical details a mere blurred appendage.

She'd covered the equations with caustic comments; whatever her opinion of them might be, she'd read them.

My secret smile was for the very real value I knew those equations possessed and the fact that they had been formulated by one of the most eminent mathematicians in the world. What this little spitfire baby would say about that had made me smile.

But—this was no smiling matter.

"Listen to me, Miss Gilbert," I said, harshly; intentionally rudely and surprised at the violence of my tone. She put one hand to her mouth, her eyes widening; but I gave her no time to protest. "You will not believe, what I have to tell you. I can't help that. What we have to do is figure a way out of it—and if you think you're a mathematician you might be able to succeed where greater brains than yours have failed."

"Now, see here—"

"I know I'm a duffer at figures. You've been at pains to tell me that. But—first—tell me if I'm anywhere near understanding those equations!"

And, to my shame, a note of pleading throbbed in my voice.

She must have picked that up. For a moment she stood there, one hand on her hip, the other slowly descending from her mouth. The sun struck through the window, glanced off her flame hair, aureoled her in light.

"I believe in starting work early. I've corrected your papers. You—you'll do. If you want to understand these equations I can't help you; they form no sort of sense of which I am aware." A bowl of daffodils on the windowsill moved gently and perfume wafted. "These equations postulate their own symbols; and these are explained. You can read them; but as to understanding what they're driving at—"

"Transverse Doppler Effect," I said, my eyes shut, listening in my memory to Alan Watkins wearily telling me that he

couldn't go down past the seventh stair, his shotgun propped by his armchair, a dead lizard from a time a hundred million years removed sprawled on the lounge floor. "Resonance technique with iron isotope fifty-seven and gamma rays. The dilation of time in a fast-moving system."

"I've read about it. But these figures of yours go miles beyond that—"

"You don't have to understand what Alan was driving at. All that is necessary is that you follow the maths."

"Necessary for what? Alan? Alan who?"

"Alan Watkins—"

"Not *the* Alan Watkins?"

"Yes. Although he'd not thank you for referring to him that way."

"But he's one of the biggest—hey, wait a minute! Hasn't he disappeared or something? Naturally—I remember that about a fellow mathematician, even if far removed from my sphere—from all the trash in the yellow press."

"He's disappeared, Miss Gilbert, and so have a lot of friends of mine. And if you go down seven of those stairs outside, you'll disappear, too!"

There was no telephone in the room. Had there been I think she'd have dialled nine-nine-nine right then and there. Presently, she said evenly: "You come bursting into my room, driven all the way from London—all right. What the hell do you want?"

"I don't want to fix a favourable report from you. I wouldn't try to bribe you for that. I am trying to warn you—to apologise—to—good grief, girl! I don't know what I *can* do!"

"You *must* be crazy. Here—I'm not having this—I'm going to . . ." She ran on to the landing, started down the stairs.

"Don't go down!" I shouted after her. I half stumbled in the polished gloom of that narrow stairway. I saw the apple green blouse, the white neck, the flame hair. I reached out a hand, skittering down the stairs.

Even then, even then I didn't really think she would disappear.

She said: "What—!"

On the seventh stair she disappeared.

"Miss Gilbert!"

Perhaps my straining eyes had played a trick. In the dimness of that narrow unwindowed stair between walls, panelled in deep-toned polished wood, I'd lost sight of her. I ran on down.

On the fourth step—was that heat? Was that a foetid jungle stench on the fifth, the sixth?

My foot hit soft carpeting on the sixth stair, I plunged on down, seven, eight, nine—soft carpeting all.

The girl's grandfather stood at the foot of the stairs.

"Did you see your grand-daughter just then?"

"No, young feller. But I heard one helluva racket."

Frantic I turned and stared up those dark treads. Why hadn't she returned? Why didn't the idiot just turn around and bolt back up the grassy slope, burst out through the Seventh Stair, back into this normal, sane, spring world?

Memory of Watkins' reference to an emerald eye, a marbled skin and wicked striking fangs, the sight of the slit all ripped in his jacket, shuddered through me.

My God! What had I done?

"Hey, young feller! What's going on? What have you been saying to Alison? She sounded really riled to me—more than usual."

Ignoring the old man—I had to, I couldn't face his reproaches if he knew—I whipped out to the car, dug under the rug in the back, brought my gear indoors. He looked at the rifle. Thoughts clashed in his mind.

"What d'you want that, for, son? But it's a handsome piece—mighty handy, I'd say—"

I went back up the stairs. The equations trembled in my hands. I had to lay them on the table and palm them with a sweaty hand to read them. She'd said I'd do; she'd said I'd do. The thought hammered away in my head as I read the equations with all my new-learned knowledge.

Would it work this time? Would I be able to go through the Seventh Stair, enter that strange and eerie world that Watkins had discovered?

And if I did—I'd be condemning myself to a lifetime of terror, living with the knowledge that I daren't walk down a flight of stairs again.

Provided always, that was, that I returned safely from that other world.

Well, this was it, then. I crumpled the equations, stuffed them in my pocket. Walking to the door was an effort. Going

out on to the landing was like wading through treacle. Everything within me screamed : "*Run, you fool ! Run !*" But, now that I had read Watkins' equations, there was nowhere to run to.

I walked slowly down the stairs. I couldn't have hurried if the whole of a hostile Pakhtun tribe bellowed and raved at my heels. The carpet's softness beneath my feet felt like complete luxury. Four stairs, then five. Was that heat ? Sweat started out on my forehead. Six. A rank ripe rotting smell ? Was it . . . ? My foot left the carpet, felt down, reaching out to the next stair.

The Seventh Stair.

I opened my eyes not remembering when I had shut them. I opened them not really believing. In that apocalyptic moment, with the feel of rough gravel beneath my foot where a moment before had been thick carpeting, I didn't really believe . . .

No jungle met my eyes. No great beasts. No hiss of wicked fangs, no slither of marbled body. I stood on a gravel roadway between two ranks of dome-headed, purple trees, bending and swaying to some unfelt breeze.

I blinked.

Deep wells of terror flowed in me, so far sunk in my cringing mind that I was able to move, to think, to observe, to act normally, quietly without sweating and shaking, without any of the outer appurtenances of fear and terror. I was like a man who has got his second wind. But, swathed in fear within me, my spirit screamed and clamoured to drive me back, back to the familiar world of Kent and out of this fantasy world of Watkins' equations.

On each side the avenue of purple, dome-headed trees cut off vision, the gravel roadway and emerald grass verges lay sunken between the trees. A strange, spicy scent titillated my nostrils, like the first smells of Africa, drifting out across tropic waters. The sky lay a washed, sun-bleached ivory, from horizon to horizon.

So, in the end, I had to look at the group ten feet away along the gravel road.

Alison Gilbert stood, not struggling, not moving, held firmly and efficiently by both wrists. Her eyes were closed. Her body sagged. Around her feet lay the twisted strands of a fine net.

Holding the girl with one hand and clearing the net away with the other stood a—well, a monster. Oh, he wasn't large or ferocious, which made the macabre appearance that much worse. About four feet tall, he was a mere hump of mustardy coloured fur, a thumb-shaped body and head in one, with two human-looking eyes set a foot down from the top, each with a sharply upward angled eyebrow, no sign of a nose or mouth, and with two spindly arms ending in hands that would have looked plump on a skeleton.

Behind this first thumbing a vehicle hovered about a foot above the ground. The body was flat and squarish with a basket-weave patterning the bottom; but I guessed the construction material to be plastic or fibreglass. From each side at the rear a thin arm reached up at forty-five degrees, ending in a flat triangular plate parallel to the ground. Set atop the front portion a transparent dome covered the driving seats. The whole thing was about the size of a fifteen hundred-weight truck and in motion emitted only a penetrating hissing.

Another thumbing was just climbing out of the opened canopy driving seat and I saw his four round pads for locomotion set at the base of his stumpy body. He carried over his arm an artifact that I guessed at once to be a weapon. The barrel flared into a cone like an old-fashioned gramophone, the butt split into two curved and padded supports that obviously fitted around his chest.

Both thumbings wore a vivid emerald green sash of some scintillating material around their middles. The whole scene flashed across my eyes with immediate force; expecting jungles and wild beasts the reality shocked me more.

I knew that if I turned around and ran I'd go plunging up the stairs in that comfortable Kentish cottage, safely back in my familiar world.

Alison did not move as the last of the net was stripped away. The second thumbing touched the ground, turned to join his comrade, looked up—and saw me.

Immediately he shouted something, high and shrill. The first monster swivelled his round eyes my way and bent, ignoring me, flicked the slender strands of the net along the gravel. The second thumbing was frantically climbing back into the flier, a blur of mustardy fur. He bent inside; the net straightened, began to wind in along its retaining cords to a projector fitted to the outside of the flier. Dumb and rigid, I stood watching. The net vanished inside the round barrel.

The next moment, with a soda-water plop, the net jetted out like a comet, opened, formed a perfectly circular descending mesh above my head.

Galvanised into action at last I ducked and jumped sideways. In the movement I realised that gravity *here* was the same as on Earth. The net struck the ground, hissing across gravel like the wash of the returning wave, began to reel in for another try. Alison, pitchforked into this world, hadn't had the chance to duck.

The thumbling grasping Alison began to drag her towards the waiting flier.

"Let her go!" I yelled. He wouldn't understand, of course; but I hoped my tone might get through to him.

Alison's eyes flew open. "Help me!" she shouted, her throat jerking. "This is—this is madness! *Help me!*"

I started to run towards her.

"Look out for the gun! It's horrible!"

Up in the flier the net hissed again, cutting the air, forming its perfect filmy circle. I dodged sideways, felt the net whish past my head. I put a hand on the thumbling's spindly arm. That arm felt corded with muscle, thin and sinewy. I pulled.

The thumbling staggered back, releasing Alison. His eyes rolled up. Up there his pal had unslung the gun, had fixed the curved stock to his chest, had aimed the coned barrel down towards me.

Alison pushed me hard.

Staggering back, managing to gain my balance by a convulsive heave, I glimpsed the first thumbling pattering away towards the flier, going over the ground with a curious upright stance, without a sign of feet, gliding as though on ice.

Something splashed on the gravel. The over-sweet, sickly smell of concentrated violets stung my nostrils.

"Violets!" gasped Alison. Her face, scraped bone white, moved agitatedly and her eyes gazed frantically at me. I put an arm on her shoulder, spun her around.

"Back this way!"

"The gun! The gun!" She was shaking now. "You don't know—it's awful!"

Lunging forward, feet scuttering on gravel, we stumbled away. Turning for another look I saw the thumbling in the flier raising his gun again. Alison's shoulder jerked. "If he

hits you—you just dissolve ! I know—I saw them dissolve a—
a thing !”

The madness of the moment, the fear in the girl, the clamped down terror in myself, the desperate desire to live and return to the sane world—all combined to make me believe her. She sounded no more bizarre than what was really happening.

The thumbling fired his cone gun. We both leaped away, half falling. A blob, shining, violet-purple, spat from the mouth of the conegun, arced through the air. It struck gravel and exploded puffily. Again that sickly-sweet odour stung my nostrils.

“Listen—if that violet globe hits you, you dissolve ! They shot a—a thing running away from them just as I—just as I arrived. It screamed !” Her hands gripped my arm, turning and twisting. “We’ve got to go home !”

“Going home won’t be easy.” I had to face a horrific fact. We’d stumbled back along the gravel path for distance enough to have carried us through the Seventh Stair and back up her narrow panelled staircase. But we were still in this eerie world facing thumblings with conguns that killed with globes of violet. We’d missed the entrance to the Seventh Stair.

She nodded towards my rifle. “Use that ! You’ll have to—to save our lives !”

Grimly, I agreed. If we were to be marooned here, searching for the way through the Seventh Stair, I hadn’t wanted to open our stay by murder. But—but those mustardy coloured thumbling were no friends. Their motive was frighteningly clear.

If they couldn’t capture us in their damned net—then they’d kill us with their conegun.

t h r e e

The thumbling lifted his congun again. No time to unsling the rifle—I put a hand, suddenly firm and unshaking, into my shoulder holster, drew the Colt. The first shot took the thumbling between the eyes. He dropped the conegun. He toppled backwards spraying red ichor.

The second thumbling made a dive for the gun. The bullet with his alien name on it took him as he bent over.

Alison turned, put her face into my shoulder, began to shake. I put an arm around her, remained quiet, letting her get rid of

it. And all the time my eyes flicked around this alien world, wary and alert, more alert, even, than I'd be in some remote hostile valley of the Hindu Kush.

Something like four minutes had elapsed since I'd walked down those polish-smelling panelled stairs back on Earth.

A sound on the gravel brought my head around fast. The Colt snouted up menacingly.

No thumbling stood there. Alison lifted her head, looked, said : " He's just like the thing those horrible beasts dissolved with their violet conegun."

There appeared no menace in this strange creature. He might, at first glance, be thought to be a man ; a short, stumpy, five-foot tall man with a head larger than proportion demanded. He had a round moon face with a smiling mouth, a pudgy nose shining red, and large, soft, doe-like brown eyes, slanting, giving the whole face a wistful, pixie look. He wore a simple one-piece garment of some coarse homespun, butternut brown, girded at the chubby waist by a broad leather belt. From the belt a long knife hung in brass fastenings. He wore no hat on wiry brown hair. His feet were thrust into sloppy, shapeless skin sandals.

About him clung an aura of gentleness that the knife could not dispel. No one, looking at him, could believe for an instant that he had been born on Earth.

His first action after I saw him surprised me. He shaded his eyes, looked along the avenue of purple trees. Impelled to follow, I looked also.

A second flier ghosted along, six feet from the ground, silent and menacing at this distance.

The little alien smiled. He ran jerkily across to the flier with the two dead thumblings stretched beside it, snatched up the fallen conegun and delved inside to bring out a canvas satchel. Holding the two objects he motioned to us and began to run towards the trees.

Alison brushed a strand of that flame hair from her forehead. She stood up, out of the protective ring of my arm. She took a deep breath.

"The situation appears clear cut. In the fliers we have thumblings who shoot to kill. Here we have a being—a Smiler—who doesn't like thumblings. They killed a friend of his minutes ago. He seems friendly. He wants us to go with him. Well ?"

"Until we can find the entrance through the Seventh Stair, then we've got to stay out of trouble. And that other flier coming up spells big trouble to me. I'm with you." I took her arm and we set off running for the trees.

If any wind of caution whispered to me that this was too open and shut a reading of the situation I felt no inclination to heed it. Why should a smile on an alien face betoken friendship? Surely, to the four-foot high thumbblings, we appeared as tall, gangly monsters. But time would sort out the problem; we needed time to find the way back through the Seventh Stair.

A flap in the corrugated bark of a purple tree slid aside; the Smiler bundled through, we followed and the flap clicked shut. Ledged in a niche in the wood of the trunk, cunningly contrived, a spyhole gave a restricted view of the gravel path between the avenue of trees. The smiler looked. Presently he turned back to us, shutting the spyhole. The interior of the tree trunk must have measured a good eight feet in diameter. Leading off on opposite sides two tunnel mouths, looking weirdly to me like London Underground tunnels in a miniature station, led into the unknown.

From the right hand tunnel a stream of thumbblings poured out. The Colt jumped into my hand—and then I saw that a Smiler like our guide led the thumbblings, and that they were russet red in colour, wearing wide leather belts studded with tools in place of the mustardy thumbblings' glinting emerald sashes.

Alison's composure, strong one moment, shaken the next, reacted smoothly to this development. Her eyes shone in the light from a bracketted torch.

"Either these thumbblings are a different tribe, or they're traitors—or the others are traitors. Only one thing I'm sure about. They radiate a more cheerful aura than the mustardy ones."

"The smilers seem friendly enough. The language is a problem, though."

Our Smiler motioned to us and we followed him to the entrance to the left hand tunnel weirdly lit by loops of trailing vines emitting a pallid radiance. Smiler extinguished the last resinous torch in its bracket on the wall and waddled strongly away along the tunnel.

We followed.

The air breathed fresh, if a little moist, and many pale ferns and jaded flowers grew from the rough earth walls, enwrapped by the glowing tendrils of radiant vines.

"All we can do now is go along," I said sharply to Alison, forestalling any question or argument. "But stick close to me."

The tunnel varied in width and height as we walked rapidly over the beaten-earth floor which remained dry and firm underfoot. From time to time other Smilers and red-squirrel thumblings passed us, entering from branch tunnels, going into wooden doors and along echoing galleries. It was clearly evident that a vast system of tunnels and caverns stretched beneath the ground and I calculated that we must have covered a good four miles in the hour that elapsed before we entered a cavern that dropped away into ominous darkness. A peeled-log railing ringed a walkway and our guide waddled surely down, not even turning to see if we followed, so sure had he become that we were sticking with him.

The walkway plunged dizzily downwards. Alison clung with her free hand to the railing stapled to the wall, the other gripped me hard. I, on the outside position, held the railing guarding the parapet, and looked over the precipice as little as possible.

Down there a titan banged and hammered insanely, sulphurous fumes coiled gaggingly upward and lurid lights flickered and flashed, bouncing red and orange reflections from the walls, shining weirdly through the smoke.

Then I saw a new form of creature walking slowly up the slope towards us. Of human height, he progressed on three legs that jerked with the effort, bulging the long robe of saffron yellow swathing him from neck to calf. His right arm, swung like a man's from a shoulder, held a glinting green bottle. But his left—on his left side he had two arms—one swinging freely from a shoulder set back from the collar-bone line, the other jutting forward, shorter, stumpier, protruding through the third sleeve in the yellow robe.

He brought the green bottle up to his face and thin fingers clicked open the lid. Thick purple vapour coiled out and he sniffed avidly. His face—two eyes, a patrician nose, a thin mouth, all in human placings—was not human. I drew no feeling of fear, no repugnance, no sense of alarm at sight of that melancholy face with its sleepy eyes and thin, sulkily drooping

mouth. Rather a feeling of pity for a being so obviously lonely, cut-off, miserable, engulfed me.

Glancing at Alison I saw that she, too, shared my feelings.

"He—it—looks so sad," she whispered.

The being walked past, three legs jerking with the effort. A whiff of pungent scent caught in my nostrils from the purple vapours from the bottle, a scent of lilacs concentrated and strengthened. Then the being had passed without a sign of our presence.

Smiler had stopped, rigidly, and had bowed his head deferentially, the cone-gun snapped in at his side as though he was on parade. When the three-legged being had passed Smiler looked after him—and I'd swear that in that pudgy smiling face shone a look of affection and pity.

Only when the strange three-legged, three-armed man had passed did I realise that his short sturdy left arm had wielded a long staff to assist his jerking legs, a staff with golden symbols nailed on it—but the thing about that staff that most impressed now, in recalling its use, was the way the being had balanced his tripod legs with it, using it to form a fourth leg where no leg existed.

"Amputated, do you think?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Probably not—he had three arms, remember. Maybe he evolved from a six-legged ancestor, three for locomotion, three for manipulation."

"Assymetric development—weird . . ."

"No more weird than anything else in this crazy place."

"You can say that again."

I didn't. But her words warmed me. She was beginning to regain the composure I had admired earlier. And in this crazy place one thing stuck out plainly; I hadn't gone into the same world as Alan Watkins, as my comrades in the old div. Where they'd gone I didn't know; I doubted if it was much worse than this.

Ahead of us now two cone-gun-armed Smilers stood one each side of a wooden door in the wall of the walkway. Here the walkway existed only as wooden slats over emptiness, a dangerous, slippery passage above eternity.

Each Smiler wore, in addition to his homespun kilt, a leather belt similar to those worn by the squirrel-red thumbings, but now, instead of being studded with implements, each supported one object only—a short, heavy, double-bitted axe with a

barbarically sharp point thrusting out between the blades. Each Smiler wore also a tall metal helmet studded with ornate brass embellishments and crowned with tall red plumes ; but these looked, somehow, ridiculous. The purpose of these guards showed in their wicked battle axes.

Our Smiler pushed past the sentries, we followed, to enter a small comfortable room with leafy carpets, rustic chairs and tables, appetising fruits and fruit drinks laid ready. Smiler waddled across to the far door, nodded to the food, went out.

This little breathing space in the midst of maniacal adventure soothed Alison. Painstakingly, I told her all about Alan Watkins and his equations, my friends who had gone after him, those other friends who would by now be congregating at my flat to read my letter and the equations. She had to believe me. She, of all people, was in no position to disbelieve.

We considered our position as we ate. "We must go along with these people," I said, "until we can get back to the purple tree avenue and find the Seventh Stair. I'm sure they mean us no harm."

"I suppose that's best . . ." She sounded more resigned than scared. The inner door opened and Our Smiler beckoned. We rose and walked after him through the doorway. Despite my big words my stomach fluttered at what might lie ahead.

After the soothing quietness of the antechamber the inner room bulged with people. Not people, of course ; Smilers, thumblings, three of the three-arms and legs men. They were all turned to face us as we entered.

I said : "Hi, gents."

And Alison giggled.

The hen-pecking order clearly seemed defined. The thumblings must be mechanics, labourers, servants. The Smilers guards, overseers, clerks. And the six-limbed creatures must be the controlling force of this labyrinthine underground city. One of the latter spoke.

"Don't understand a word, old fruit," I said, mainly for Alison's benefit. I'd already decided that if these beings meant us harm we'd have been dusty motes drifting on the breeze long ago.

And a voice from the back of the room said : "Perhaps I can help you, friends."

The shock of that unexpected English voice struck home. I stared into the corner, past the alien beings, searching for the owner of that cultured voice.

Obligingly, the aliens moved aside. Alison and I stared at a man, an ordinary Earthly human being, clad in tattered grey lounge suit and white shirt, the old school tie ripped up under one ear. His neat black Homburg crushed forward over his forehead. His face showed, golden-tanned in the vine lighting, handsome, refined, the face of a man sure of himself in life with a high position of power and authority and wealth.

His body strained against the massive loops and coils of heavy, metallic, cruel chains that bound him to the rocks of the wall at his back ; chains that constricted his movements, bowed his back, contorted his legs so that he hung half suspended, an inanimate human sack suspended in an iron web.

Involuntarily, I started forward. A magic compulsion about this man, so handsome, so cruelly chained, drew me forward with passionate desire to free him, to strike the chains from around his abused body, lift him up, succour him, rescue him from the viciously alien un-earthly beings torturing him . . .

My chest bumped the point of a double-bladed axe. The Smiler holding it had to raise the weapon high to reach me ; but I still felt the poniard-sharpness of that glittering point through my clothes.

For an instant roaring redness engulfed me, making me shake, driving me on to strike away that double-bitted axe, plunge on to tear away those constricting chains . . .

"What the hell goes on here ?" I shouted, punching the axe aside. "Why are you chained up ?"

"Come back, Phil !" shouted Alison, unheeded.

A long string of speech from a six-limbed man, a waffle of movement as I stood, undecided, those flaming passions to tear away the captive's chains burning into my soul, and then I felt ropes expertly flung chafe my wrists, my neck. I writhed, then. I struggled as a maniac struggles facing the padded cell.

Then I was lying on the floor looking up as a Smiler, still smiling, thoughtfully yanked an end of rope. I felt the noose tighten up around my neck—and I quietened down. The raging desire to free the strange earthman subsided, flickered out like a dying candle.

"Sorry about that, friend. Nice try, though."

The stranger's words made little sense—then.

"Who are you?" I twisted a little within the compass of the rope to stare up at him, all thought of Alison gone. "What's going on? How did you get here?"

An expression of glee flickered across the man's patrician features, to be quenched in as vindictive a scowl as any stage heavy might own.

"My name is Dru Resencher—no, do not look surprised. You must know that this body you see is not mine, because you are here!"

Alison gave a choked-off sob. The little sound brought me back to a slender grasp on reality. Not his body? Because I was here? But Alison's small cry made me turn my head to regard her with concern, fearful lest she should have finally cracked. She stood up four square to the surrounding alien beings, her face pale, her eyes wide, staring enormously upon the chained man who claimed his body was not his own.

"What—what do you mean?" she said, and her voice whispered between the alien creatures and sighed among the radiant vines.

The face of the chained man altered suddenly, alarmingly. Black eyebrows drew down, eyes stared out like flints, the mouth tightened so that white ridges stood out beneath the lower lip.

"What do you mean," he said gratingly. "That you do not know what I mean? *How have you come here?*"

Alison opened her mouth. I said, loudly: "As if you don't know! And you look rather pretty, chained up like that, Resencher."

His scowl deepened. "The Dru Resencher," he said, angrily, contemptuously, "to vermin like you."

And this was the man I had had such overpowering desires to save! I began to get ideas on that.

He could scarcely move in the binding chains; but he contrived to indicate indifference to me. Like some aristo on his way to doomsday in the tumbrel, he denied my existence. I and my like might kill him; but he'd not deign to notice such a vulgar act from such a vulgar plebian.

four

One of the six-limbed beings, wearing a saffron yellow robe, carrying a heavy staff much inlaid with gold and precious stones, moved awkwardly across on his three legs. His short left arm jabbed the staff down hard before the chained man. His long left arm and his good right arm reached out, around the man's head, removed the black Homburg hat.

Alison gasped. I whistled.

Stretching like a golden skull cap over the man's head, coming down in a widow's peak over the forehead, extending around above the ears and sweeping down to the nape of the neck, gleamed and shone a magnificent golden covering, skin tight. The radiant vines' light reflected back a glittering glory from that eerie head-covering.

Smiler unhitched his rope, gestured for me to rise. Alison and I were shepherded forward, closer to the chained man, who after an angry, futile, impotently automatic gesture as his hat was removed, had regained his impassivity.

"Obviously they want us to have a look," I said softly.

"This thing gets weirder by the minute." Alison's hand found my arm, gripped in a contact as reassuring to me as to her. "You went berserk then. You didn't act as though you knew what you were doing."

"I didn't," I said. And left it at that.

Completely ignoring us in a private world we could not share, the chained man—the Dru Resencher—hung in his bonds, his patrician face fixed and composed. The six-limbed being motioned. We bent forward.

From the golden scalp covering a thin, gossamer fine thread ran down the nape of the neck just to where the spinal cord incurses to give springy support to the skull. Here the thread stopped. Then Alison gave another sharp cry.

"It goes in ! That thread goes into his spinal column !"

Again strange fancies swept over me—over me, the so-called hard-boiled extranophilist, used to the weird, the strange and the uncanny. This man strung up here was a real man, I felt sure, a member of *Homo sapiens*. But no ordinary mortal ever wore such a golden cap before, and no man of our Earth could be here except by reason of Alan Watkins' equations. Yet—this man was here. This human body that was not the body of the being called the Dru Resencher, this hulk of protoplasm, must—*must* !—have passed through the seventh Stair by another route.

"I think I get it," I said, shakily. My hands ran clammy and my throat was as dry as old camel skin. "This poor devil's body has been taken over by—by something, some being, some alien entity, whose own body is that damned golden skull cap."

Alison's eyes swung away from Resencher. Before she could question my conclusions, Resencher spoke. His voice held contempt and hate and a freezing intolerance that chilled me. "I congratulate you on your perspicacity. I, the Dru Resencher, am the brain. This body—its name was Harold Arthur Robbins—is merely a vehicle for me. But if you try to part us—the body will die !"

"Yeah," I said bitterly. "But so will you !"

"Only if you kill me—which you dare not ?" !

"Oh ? And why shouldn't I wrench out your dirty little tail and burn you to cinders ?"

The fury with which I spoke must have shaken him a little. A small pause ensued before he said, mildly : "My people brought you into this world. You will never leave through the Portal of Life if you have killed a Porvone. But if you free me I will speak for you, secure you safe passage back to your Earth. I am the Dru Resencher. Do not forget that."

I couldn't help grudging him a little admiration. He was in a spot where his alien life might be snuffed out at any moment. I was cynical enough to understand that he felt no agony—poor Harold Arthur Robbins would be suffering, if his brain still belonged in any degree to him—but the Dru Resencher could still talk and argue coherently ; logically, that was, to anyone who had journeyed to this dark world through the Porvone Portal of Life.

That reluctant upwelling of admiration made me less hostile in a purely personal sense ; but I could not trust this man—this alien being from another world. So I said : "You tried to compel me to free you. Look where that got you—and me. These people may look comical ; but they know what they're doing."

"Just because you have escaped—temporarily—from the city has given you grandiose ideas. You think you can outwit the Porvone. Poor deluded fool ! You and all these vermin here—especially the Litani, oh, especially the Litani !—will be eradicated without trace when the Porvone cleanse this rat's warren of foulness."

The six-limbed man had leaned forward sharply, and I surmised that he was a Litani. I was learning about this mad world ; but I needed to know a great deal more.

Risking a chance shot, I said with an overcontrolled curl of contempt : " Anyone would think you owned this world the way you talk."

The Dru Resencher smiled with the face of Harold Arthur Robbins. " We own this world now by right of might. The Litani and their ilk, the traitorous Dumps and the pitiful Smonen, will be utterly swept away from all posts of power. This will be so !"

Then the six-limbed man, the Litani, drew us gently away from the Dru Resencher. At the doorway I turned to look back at him. He hung there in his chains and his face glaring after us reflected nothing but absolute conviction. Even as I watched he switched again into that distant withdrawnness ; once more he ignored with absolute certitude the beings about him.

Sitting an hour or so later in a room that might have been a twin to the anteroom leading to the chained Dru Resencher ; but a room comfortably removed from that dizzily dangerous walkway down the precipice, I wound my wrist-watch as I digested a meal provided by cheerful Smilers. Alison sat opposite, more relaxed now and willing to discuss the situation.

" It's pretty evident that the Smilers and the red-brown thumbblings don't mean us any harm. They're preserving their hate for the Povone and the mustardy thumbblings."

" True." She picked up an apple and bit into it. Her teeth crunched down, white and perfect. " And the Smilers I'd guess are Smonen. Which makes the thumbblings Dumps."

" An appropriate name."

" But, Phil. What's it all about ?"

" You ask me ! I feel too darn guilty about dragging you into all this. What a stupid clot I've been ! Putting those abominable equations into the wrong envelope—and here I was, with a grand strategy all mapped out. A big party of boys from the old armoured div. Plenty of weaponry, supplies, all the safari stores we'd need, bottles of beers, all safely stashed away at my place. Everything ready to hike into Watkins' World and hunt up him and the other lads. And what happens ?"

She surprised me. "If we get out of this alive, I think I shall be eternally grateful to you for bringing colour into a drab life—"

"Oh, really, Alison!"

"Well, look at me. Not much of a beauty, am I! Oh, you'll protest; but I'm the one who's looked into my mirror for twenty-eight years. My mother and father died just after I was born. Grand-dad brought me up. I went up to University, he did that for me. I thought I was quite good at maths—and I end up housekeeping for the old man and earning a crust being a correspondence course tutor!"

Her eyes—really magnificent eyes, shone with brimming moisture in the light of alien radiant vines.

I leaned across, touched her hand gently.

"All right, Alison. I won't tell you you're beautiful. I've seen plenty of painted and powdered women in my time—too many perhaps. None of 'em—not one—had a tithe of what you have. All you need is confidence to peel the scales from your eyes when you look into that mirror. And, by God, Alison—we're getting out of this world and we're going to take a tour down Bond Street and you're going to emerge—well—hell's bell's, girl! You're a stunner! Don't let a cloistered village life and old gossips let you think otherwise!"

"Propinquity . . ." she said, in a small voice.

"I've been in far worse messes than this. There was the time a hostile Pakhtun tribe chased me over the Khybar and I'd run out of ammo . . ."

I bored her with that until she showed some of her old spark, broke in with: "Yes. I'm sure you're a great big hairy-chested hero. But I'd still like to know what we do now!"

If I'd known the answer to that one I'd have been out doing it, not sitting around spinning yarns to a beautiful girl who didn't even know she was pretty.

I said: "As soon as we can we've got to get back to the avenue of purple trees. We'll just have to—"

The door behind me opened. Turning, my mouth still open, I saw a Litani enter. He bowed gravely, first to Alison, then to me. I nodded my head curtly.

I didn't think I had seen this one before. He wore a green gown in place of the more familiar yellow, a long gracious robe covered with cabalistic signs. His staff was more heavily

encrusted with golden plaques, jewels, pearls, than any I'd seen before.

He said : " Forgive me if I intrude upon your meal ; but I have been away and unable to pay my respects to you before this. How did you escape from the city ? "

" Uh—come in, sit down," I said, quite unable to think of anything else to say right then.

Alison smiled and sat herself down opposite the Litani.

" I'm so glad we've found someone who can speak English ! Please—do have something to drink—you look so terribly tired."

" There is no time. But I thank you, dear lady, for your charitable thought. However—" he poured a flagon of the fruit wine and drank between sentences. " Tell me how you escaped from the Porvone's accursed city."

" We didn't—" Alison began.

I said loudly : " We'll tell you that with pleasure, Mister—uh—"

" Welling. I learned your language from the single member of your world who has so far escaped from the city. He was a singular man. He is now, I am afraid, dead." Welling sipped. " The Porvone have erupted through their Portals of Life on to our world and now no one is safe. They desire wealth and power and dominance over other men as well as strong bodies to use in lieu of their own golden travesties. My people have made a home of sorts here in the bowels of the earth, a refuge from the Porvone."

" Your people, Mister Welling ? "

He smiled charmingly. " Not Mister—I possess a title that is comparable to your Earl. But please call me Welling. It will suffice. All our world, the world I have known and loved, is falling apart. My people are being subverted, profiteered, tortured, killed, all so that the Porvone may add to their possession and further glorify their evil cult of Gezzen. Their city rises gleaming above the plain and my people slave to maintain it."

Alison and I sat listening as this alien man talked, the agony and weariness written plainly on that alien and yet heart-breakingly human face.

" The Smonen are my people. They are intelligent after their own fashion, loyal and brave. But the dumps—they come from another world, brought here by the Porvone as slaves.

We have managed to re-orient a few of them, make them into men again. The Dumps owing allegiance to the Porvone have been injected with subtle and devilish chemicals, it thralls their minds, turns their willpower to water in the thralldom of the Porvone."

"And it also, I suppose," said Allison, "turns their fur that horrible mustardy colour?"

"That is so. When we have cured them their fur returns to its normal healthy reddish-brown."

"A quick way of telling the sheep from the goats."

Welling smiled comically. "Your pardon?"

"I expect you didn't have the chance to learn all our foibles of speech. I mean you can tell a friend from an enemy."

"Assuredly. And any being wearing a golden skull cap is to be feared worse than death itself."

A chill swept through that underground chamber as the Earl Welling spoke. I believed what he said, of alien entities whose bodies were golden sheaths fitting over the heads of the bodies they made their own, penetrating through into this world—into Watkins' World—for plunder. And, the man Robbins proved it, they had also gone secretly into my own Earth.

"Welling—are there any more Earthmen—that is, pardon the solecism, men from my own world—in that city?"

"It grieves me to tell you ; but, yes, there are others. The Porvone have raided, conquered or merely explored many parallel worlds. And they have a penchant for men like yourself. You have strong bodies and the Porvone love to use them, to insert their golden tendrils into spinal cords as you might ride a—ah—horse. If the bodies of slaves are not strong they may be used in any of a hundred different ways in the city. But, once inside that evil place—they are dead."

"You said one escaped."

He moved his long left arm vaguely. "True. But he was an exceptional man. And he is dead. At least, I think he is . . ."

"I'd like a closer look at this city, Welling. Tell me, is there any jungle within—oh, say, forty miles from here?" Then I had a thought, and added : "You know how long a mile is?"

"Yes. And there is jungle, just west of the city, about fifty miles away."

I turned on Alison. "It fits ! Maybe, maybe, after all, this is Watkins' World !"

"Why get all steamed up about that? What good does that do us? We want to get out of here." She stood up and paced restlessly. "And, Phil, why go poking about that city? You know what could happen to you?"

"I know. But—but my pals could be in there!"

The Litani scientist stood up. He regarded us with that level grave stare that held nothing of insolence or pride but only a searing agony for the blackness sweeping over his world. The golden symbols on his staff shimmered and shot back reflections in the light from the radiant vines.

"It seems that you have found a way into my world that is not the same as the Porvone Portals of Life. Strange. I understand enough of the theory to know that many worlds lie closely packed alongside each other and the entrances are atomically thin; but tougher than the strongest steel. The Porvone consume immense amounts of power to batter a way through, yet you—you—"

"That was an accident, Welling." I, too, stood up. "If we can go back to the exact same spot we can return to our own world. Otherwise—" I shook my head.

Welling shook his own head in negative response.

"We fear that the Porvone-controlled Dumps even now search at the spot you killed two of them. They may find that tree opening. If they do, we must move on to other underground sanctuaries. The place swarms with Dumps and fliers, large and small."

Alison put one hand on the table, bracing herself.

I swallowed, hard.

"But we can't stay here! We can't be condemned to live in this world for ever!"

Welling spread two of his hands helplessly.

"The Litani fight a hopeless struggle against the Porvone. The Porvone batter their way into many worlds, your own included. Maybe, maybe you could stay and help us fight them."

"Yes, but!" I said, and looked across at Alison.

The thrill of danger sustained me now; now I'd got over that first deep fear. Alison, too, looked in better shape. But, I couldn't expose her to more danger, hell, I'd done enough to her already merely bringing her here.

Smiler entered the room, dipping his head to Welling. I thought it was our Smiler, he had a little nick out of one ear. His mouth, still curved, still grinning, showed less happiness than before, and in his slanting eyes a cloud gathered. He spoke rapidly to Welling.

Welling's face, too, clouded over. He straightened his lean figure, his three arms pressing back against his sides. His staff grated a steel tip across the floor.

"I am sorry to tell you this," he said. And, listening, I heard that sorrow throbbing in his voice. "The Porvone—through their agents, the Dumps—did discover that tree entrance. The discovery is not too bad, provided they do not penetrate beyond a certain point. Here we may be able to misdirect their endeavour." I watched him, trying to read earthly understanding into his alien features. He nodded to the Smiler. "Joli, here, tells me that the Dumps are through and approaching fast. We must all leave immediately."

five

We all left—fast. Running along hard-earth corridors with Welling moving with surprising agility on his three legs and staff, I had no need to give Alison an assist. Her long trew-clad legs flashed ahead of me, dragging me along by sheer compulsion as much as the fear of what lay behind drove me on by terror.

We passed many strange and eerie incidents, movements, lights and colours ; our shadows pacing us in ghoulish multi-branching cavortings on walls and floor. In places the radiant vines grew thinly and we passed through a shadowed land of whisperings and sighs, of the soft rustle of underground wells and the dank, never-ceasing dripping of sluggish water. Our numbers grew as Smonen and Dumps joined us until we formed an undulating throng, pressing on with our faces all turned in one direction—those of us who had faces.

Thinking to ask about the Dru Resencher I sought Welling's side and tried to pace his three-legged gait. That being impossible, I moved on beside him, Alison on my other side.

"The Dru ? His gaolers have orders covering this contretemps." We all ducked to avoid a low overhang and when we straightened up I caught the tail-end of the flicker of iron across Welling's face.

"So you've killed him?"

"No. When a Porvone is separated from his host, he usually kills the body. Residual knowledge remains in the host's brain and if another Porvone took over would inherit much secret knowledge of his kinsman. We will try to keep the man Robbins alive; but the task may be beyond us."

The motley horde of fugitives had been steadily climbing and soon we passed from the tunnels into a narrow cleft in purple mountains where Smonen with cone-guns and axes stood guard. The sky blazed with sunshine. The air tasted bracing and fresh after the tunnels. Ahead of us the strange procession wended, keeping always in clefts and gullies, a moving ribbon of alien bodies.

Small groups of people moved hurriedly across, waiting under cover until waved on by guarding Smonen. Welling, Joli, Alison and I together with half a dozen other Dumps and Smonen travelled in a body. Welling stood up well to the punishment of rapid movement, his great staff thumping on the rocks.

Under cover of a granite outcrop, veined with ore, with a precipitous view downwards across a wide valley and a lazy, serpentine river, a guard Smonen halted us with upraised axe. Beyond him the party immediately in front of us hurried, slipping and scrambling, across a naked scree, making for the black round opening of a tunnel.

"We must wait until they are safely across," Welling explained. "This little scree is within sight of a Porvone fortress on the plain."

I looked down.

The fortress was easy to locate, a glowering edifice of grey stone, turreted and battlemented, frowning out on the green and golden landscape. The glint of weapons speared up from the battlements. The fort looked like a grey ulcer in the flank of healthy living flesh.

"Guarding your people as they work, I suppose, Welling?"

"Yes. Escape is almost impossible. Our passages honey-comb these hills and we believe the Porvone have so far not discovered that they are here. If it comes to a fight our axes and the few cone-guns we have captured will not last long against the fliers and weapons of the Porvone."

Far across the plain, a green line barring the horizon, lay the jungle. It had to be. I took the crumpled, red-ink scrawled equations from my pocket, pressed them into Alison's hand.

"Hold on to these and don't lose them. They might help you get out of this world. And you might study them, figure out why they do what they do."

Alarm showed in her eyes. "What are you going to do?"

I wasn't completely sure myself. I said: "I wouldn't read those equations again. You might be pitchforked down another Seventh Stair, out of this world into another—"

"I've been thinking about these blasted equations of yours. Maybe I will come up with something that Professor Watkins overlooked. It's not unknown . . ."

"I hope you do, Alison. I really hope you do!"

Another party joined us under the granite outcrop; one Litani and a retinue of Smonen and Dumps. We prepared to scramble wildly across that naked scree. Turning for one last undecided look across the plain at that beckoning jungle I caught rapid movement below, the flash and glint of sunlight from steel.

"Hold it a minute, Welling! Let this other party go on. Look down there!"

"Another hopeless escape," Welling sighed. "See, already a flier is leaving the fortress. Those people running down there cannot know the fort is situated there; it must be hidden from them by a fold in the ground."

The small far-off figures of men running between leafy trees on the fringes of cultivated fields fascinated me. From the fortress a flier ghosted across the ground. I doubted if the things were hovercraft; but what impressed me now was the shape and silhouette of those unsuspecting fugitives down there, running straight into trouble.

"They look like men," I said, and lifted the field glasses to my eyes.

Careful work with focus adjustment snapped the hurrying men into clear view. They were men. Men shaped like me. Four of them, scrambling now through a hedge and cutting across a field, turning to stare back in alarm as the flier cruised gently after them, four hunted men from my own world making a desperate bid for escape.

"They must be from the city," Welling sounded amazed.

Alison said: "We've got to help them!"

I said : " If I take a hand now the Porvone will know someone's up here. Welling, take care of Alison until I get back." I gave no one a chance to argue. In a series of flying bounds I went down the shadowed side of the cliff, keeping to gullies and dried watercourses, all my old stalking skill flowing back with a wave of pure enjoyment. If only Alison hadn't been hanging around my neck, a lovely millstone, I'd have revelled in the whole adventure much earlier.

I heard Alison shout : " Take care, Phil !"

If I could get far enough away from that scree and tunnel mouth when I tackled the flier the chances were good that I could knock it out and get the men back up before the Porvone in the fort could react. Desperate though the plight of those fugitives was, I just couldn't start a selfish battle that might jeopardize Welling and his people.

The flier lifted into my field of view, coasting remorselessly across a cultivated field, flitting into the shadow of tall trees, dome-headed but burnished bronze.

Running with the four men, who cast apprehensive glances behind them, padded three reddish-brown Dumps.

The sun beamed brilliantly from that bone bare sky. A twinkle reflected from the transparent hood enclosing the flier's driving seats. If I missed . . .

Almost within certain range, now. The men and Dumps angled across my front and in their gawky movements fatigue and despair showed eloquently. They'd run a long way. Just how it happened I wasn't sure, all my attention had concentrated on that ghosting flier ; but from the tail of my eye I caught a single glimpse of two Dumps falling all haphazardly at the drainage ditch.

Instantly two of the men turned, jumped back over the ditch, bent to help up the fallen thumbings. The hood snapped up on the flier. A mustardy coloured thumbing leaned out, aiming his conegun. He fired.

The globe of violet, the size of a cricket ball, sailed with deceptive slowness through the air. It struck a prostrate Dump squarely.

I watched—and horror engulfed me.

The Dump screamed. His body tottered upright and the men leaped back, helpless. Over the bright fur a dark violet stain crept ominously, a flood of oozing violet that rolled up towards

his head. He waved those stick-like arms in futile frantic gestures.

And then he melted.

His little body flowed and dissolved. In less than a second his body dissolved like ice in the sun, flowed into a puddle, dried, wafted away in a pathetic scattering of dust.

It was a long shot. The rifle felt firm and clean in my hands. The telescopic sight centred on that mustardy thumbling lifting his conegun for a second shot. Carefully, on an indrawn breath, I squeezed the trigger.

The thumbling reared up. Then his body folded into a concertina of fur. He toppled from the flier. And as he fell I sent a second shot through the canopy into his companion.

That fierce surge of savage satisfaction had to be conquered, driven down back into the primal past from whence it came—a civilised man of the twentieth century ought not to feel pleasure at the death of any intelligent being, alien or human ; but sometimes lofty ideals greyed around the edges when the impact of bestiality forced that civilised man to react with his own brand of force.

The four men jumped around as though they instead of the thumblings had been shot.

I stood up, rifle lax but ready in my hands.

"Hey ! Over here !"

They saw me and started to run ; and I smiled a smile of relief as I saw them sticking to cover, keeping hedges between them and the fort. Campaigners, then.

Long before they reached me I'd slung the rifle—after pushing two more rounds into the magazine—and begun to wonder just how they thought they were going to explain themselves. The sun burned from that ivory sky and in the next field birds chirruped away cheerfully, insects buzzed and clicked beneath a hedgerow and the scents of wild flowers stirred pleasantly on the breeze.

Of the four, Tony Ufton spoke first.

"Phil ! So you got through !" He rocked back on his heels, hand on hips. "I always had a sneaking suspicion you were a duffer at maths."

And I burst out laughing. "I made a mental bet, Tony, that you'd be the first to speak—"

Steve Searles said : "And it took you all this time to swot up, right, Phil ?"

Punchy Draycott was looking at my full bandoleer with the knowing glance of the born scrounger.

"Hey, Phil, old man—we've shot away all our own ammo. How's about a divvy out?"

Jock McTaggart, the old Div's signals officer, unstrapped his walky-talky and dumped it down with a thankful grunt.

"Time some o' you lazy hounds took a turn carrying this."

And then we were all talking at once.

They looked in fair shape, far better than I'd expected. Oh, their clothes were torn and dirty, their beards roughly hacked back; but their shoes were still intact and they appeared, although tired, not to be the beaten and desperate men I had dreaded to find. Not surprisingly, a touch of elegance still clung to the way Tony Ufton wore a palm leaf hat—although the leaves were not those of any terrestrial palm.

I told them my story first, dwelling mournfully on my feelings when they'd all trooped down the Seventh Stair leaving me like a fancy-dress loon on the Underground steps. I finished soberly; "Where are the others? Did you find Alan?"

Ufton shook his head, his face suddenly grim.

"We've seen not a sign of him, Phil. The others are still holed up in some caves t'other side of the jungle. Your Litani pal is the very man we're trying to find—"

"How's that?"

"Listen to me, you confounded bird-brain, and I'll tell you! When we went through—not really believing, even then—we got mixed up with a mob of the beasties Alan had told you about. By the time we'd sorted them out we were so twisted around that we couldn't find the way back."

The others nodded at this and I could realise only too well the chilling dismay and despair that must have gripped them—as it had me. We all sat comfortably on a bank under the shelter of gorgeous scarlet leaved flowers in which giant bumble bees buzzed merrily. The two Dumps had padded off to the flier.

Telling the story by turn, the four told me the rest. They'd met up with the thumbings and the Smilers, had learned about the Porvone, had had to shoot their way out of trouble, from wild beasts and Porvone and their thumbing minions. I realised anew that I'd chosen good comrades with whom to go

on an adventure ; and only now at this belated time had I at last joined up with them.

They'd learned the language of the Smilers—a language used by the Litani for giving orders and which the reddish-brown Dumps also were taught. A story was in general circulation that a man of our Earth had escaped from the city and the Litani Earl—Welling—was thought to know something of that. But, over on the other side of the jungle, nearly a hundred miles from here, the people living might have existed in another world. Welling ran this area ; a Litani Earl called Bexley ran that in which my comrades had been trying to stay alive.

“ But the most important and dangerous development,” said Ufton, batting a fly from his nose, “ is that these damned golden-skulled Porvone can blast a way into our own Earth ! They take a few people from time to time and use them as—as bodies. But everything points to a large scale invasion—”

“ Not against Earthly troops, Tony ! They wouldn't stand a chance !”

“ You haven't seen the half of it, boy. They have some beam of yellow light that ties up your muscles in knots. You just stand there like a blasted statue and they trot along and tie you up. We saw it working—and we've seen their coneguns at work, too.”

“ Yes,” I said. “ I saw your thumbing pal—”

“ A tragedy. The other two, Bacon and Eggs, we call 'em—are devoted to us. Pretty good mechanics, they'll have that flier working in no time.”

“ Are you thinking what I'm thinking ?”

Jock McTaggart rumbled : “ If Alan's in yon damned city—well—it'll take more than just one flier to get him out.”

That was the first time I'd had to acknowledge the terrible idea that Alan Watkins might be a captive in the Porvone city, might be existing horribly there wearing a golden skull cap.

Slowly, Steve Searles shook his head : “ I imagine that Alan wouldn't be regarded as a strong enough body to serve a Porvone. He's probably slaving there now—if he isn't dead !”

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I had half expected recriminations from these men. They had been violently torn from all that they had known, been pitchforked into another, alien and hostile, world. And the man who had sent them there hadn't gone with them. The cheerful way they twitted me on my ignorance of maths warmed and heartened me. They were good eggs.

"Welling told me that the man who escaped from the city and who taught him in English is dead. If you were hoping he was Alan—"

Tony Ufton tilted his palm leaf hat. "We wondered. But, if he's dead . . ."

"Let's go see this Earl Welling, anyway," said Steve Searles. "I want to study the inter-tribal relationships—"

"Huh," snorted Punchy Draycott, rising and wiping at his luxuriant moustache. "And there speaks the scientist, the paleo-whatsit feller!"

"Mon," said Jock McTaggart, deliberately lapsing, "Steve wouldnae fash himsel' if he spent the rest of his born natural in this domned place!"

We began to walk back, keeping in cover, after Tony Ufton had called out to the thumbings in twittery language. The rocks felt nowhere near as hard and hostile as they had when I'd clambered down them.

"I suppose this place isn't a past re-creation of Earth, Steve? It is a parallel world?"

"As to that," Searles said off handedly, "I don't really know—or care. I'm going to have the rest of my life cut out just cataloguing and ordering the life here—it's fantastic!"

"These big beasties are real mean," said Draycott, hefting his tommygun. "How about that ammo, Phil? It's no good to me; but the others have three oh threes."

Splitting the ammunition four ways I handed it over. I felt as though I was donating my back teeth. "Colt forty-five, anyone?"

I had to clamp down on that mean flash of thanksgiving as each shook his head. "Webley thirty-eight—Smith and Wesson ditto—Luger nine—"

But they all had a few rounds left for their hand guns.

And, carried like new laid eggs, two grenades bulged each of their jacket pockets.

"Didn't want to use a spectacular firework on that damned flier until the fort couldn't see us. And their conegun shoots its filthy violet ball farther than you can sling a grenade."

Draycott spoke for them all, apologising, I saw, for the death of the third thumbling. However beastly the explosion of a grenade might be, it was a far cleaner thing than the engulfment of that violet ball.

Above us the naked scree lay silent and deserted, the black hole to the tunnel no longer guarded by axe-wielding Smonen. I clambered up quickly, anxious to rejoin Alison and Welling.

No warning prickle alerted me. One moment the five men were scrambling up the rocks; the next the cavernous gullies echoed to a rumbling discharge and the tunnel mouth collapsed in a slow cascade of rocks and spurting grey dust. Echoes banged around the hills.

"What the—I!"

"They've sealed off the tunnel!" Real alarm took me. Was this part of the plan—and was I left outside? Or had the Provone taken a hand?

A shadow showed on the granite outcrop, flitting, there and gone in a heartbeat. I grabbed Ufton, shouted to the others. "Get down! Fast! That's a flier up there!"

"By God!" Ufton said. "I've been waiting for this!" I caught a glimpse of silver and gold between his fingers.

We all pressed closer to the rocks. The flier sailed over the crest, about fifty yards off.

"She's a destroyer type," McTaggart told me. The flier must have been six times as large as the ones I'd seen. Ufton had crammed the rounds into his magazine now, was lifting the rifle.

"Hold it, Tony!" Draycott's words cut into our ears. "You go pooping off at that baby and you know what you'll get."

Slowly, dapper Tony Ufton lowered the rifle. "You're right, Punchy. But it feels—it feels good to have a few rounds in the mag and one up the spout."

"You lads must have been real fire-eaters," I said.

"You don't know the half of it, laddie," said McTaggart, grimly. Steve Searles said hoarsely: "They've picked up some more poor slaves. Look—on that transparent balcony—"

On the destroyer-flier's flank a railed walkway with a transparent windscreen extended from half way down to the stern, here enormous arms and giant triangular plates spread

upwards, brethren to those smaller arms and plates of the two man fliers. On the walkway figures struggled. I looked. I wasn't sure—the field glasses snapped up—I looked again—and I was sure.

"They've got Alison ! Alison and Welling—captured !"

Some time later, when no doubt remained that Alison and Welling and Joli and the others I had left under cover of that granite outcrop had been captured by the Porvone, I calmed down enough to say : "That settles that. I'm going to that damned city and knock the place down if necessary to get Alison and the others out."

"You always were a one for the girls," Ufton said. "But—"

"It's no good arguing. You clowns have been in this world long enough to know the score. Why haven't you tried to knock over that damned city before ?"

"Tell him, Punchy," said Searles, resignedly.

"It's like this old boy. At first it was a tough job just to keep alive. We've told you about that. But we checked on this city. We didn't know what the score was, as you put it, then ; so we just ambled up like pals calling for a pleasant pint. They attacked us with their violet balls and their yellow beams and we only got clear by throwing everything we had at them."

"When we found out what went on in there," finished McTaggart sombrely, "we knew that if Alan had been taken there it would be useless our going in after him. And we didn't know for sure that he had—"

"All right." I stood up and held out my hand, palm up. "I'm not blaming you blokes. Maybe I was lucky coming through in a different place and having the set-up explained to me first. But I'm going in after Alison. Let me have my ammo back. I'll probably need it."

Ufton looked surprised.

"So will we, won't we ? And four rifles firing are better than one—"

"You mean you are coming in with me ?"

They looked pained. Ufton said : "Kick him, somebody."

I smiled at them. I'd be the first to understand if, after their experiences here, they'd decided that the city was not for them. I was still fresh to the horror and mystery of this world. I hadn't fought for life against wild beasts, starved, hidden, as they had.

Jock McTaggart glanced at his wrist watch.

"Let's get the time average."

Everyone compared watches. Mine, of course, showed nothing like theirs.

"We felt it important to keep a track of time," Searles said in his scientific way. "And the errors in our watches will make interesting reading for the manufacturers when we get back."

The walky talky was again unlimbered and McTaggart settled down before it like a high priest before the altar. From time to time we glanced about, on the lookout for more fliers. The set warmed up. The aerial did not glint in the sunlight; caution saw to that.

In answer to my question, Searles answered for Jock. "The Litani are an interesting people, they run a primitive kind of industry and know a little about electricity. We adapted some accumulators and charge 'em up every chance we get."

"Hush, mo—" said Jock, and, quickly: "I've got him. It's Stan Shaw."

"Tell him to get down to where you lot came into this world. If Charlie Hawtrey read my letter we'll be having reinforcement." I chuckled. "Tell him they'll be bringing ammo—and beer."

They all licked their lips.

Arrangements were soon made. McTaggart slid his aerial down and looked up at me.

"Phil," he said with that seriousness about him that was in so startling a contrast to the others' lightheartedness. "We're not in for a picnic. But, for your sake, I hope we are in time to save the girl."

"And her's," I said, ruffled. "I'm worried about Alan."

Carefully, our little group descended the rocks to the valley where the two thumbings—Eggs and Bacon—waited with the captured flier. The thing wouldn't take more than four of us, and we needed one Dump aboard to run it. Tony Ufton and Punchy Draycott elected to fly back with me and Bacon; urgency dictated the splitting of our party, unpleasant though that was. We waved goodbye to Steve Searles and Jock McTaggart and Eggs, shouting to them to hurry up and meet us at the rendezvous.

The flier rose with that penetrating hissing, blue sparks crackling from the triangular plates, headed off six feet above

the ground, going at a steady six miles an hour—and taking us on a venture I could not but regard with foreboding and uneasiness ; but with the determination not to stop trying until Alison was free—or I was dead.

The lads of the old armoured div were never campaigners likely to ignore their stomachs ; when we arrived at the cave mouth—unerringly found by Bacon in the patchy illumination of an Earth-type Moon—a slap-up meal lay spread for us. We'd slept aboard the flier in seats roomy enough for us and on which the Dumps perched half standing up. Now the dawn of another day in Watkins' World, only half an hour or so off, promised more sunshine, heat, action and blood.

Much slapping of backs and jocular insults greeted me. If I had harboured dark thoughts that these men had forgotten the reason why they had plunged into Watkins' World, I was soon disabused of that idea.

"We came in for old Alan, and we don't see us leaving without finding out what did happen to him." Ufton spoke for them all.

"He is the only one able to conjure his blasted equations," Steve Searles said, poking the fire. "We just can't find that entrance through which we came down the Underground stairs. Maybe Alan can figure a way for us to get back to Earth."

I felt uncomfortable. "Let's get this straight," I said slowly. "We don't know Alan is in the city. But we do know that Alison and Welling and the others are. I mean to get Alison out. But—but that isn't necessarily finding Alan."

"We're all going in." Punchy Draycott had gone straight to a wooden box in the corner of the cave and had been working there ever since. "Charlie Hawtrey and the others haven't come through. What that means is anybody's guess. But once this mob is inside the city you go after your piece of crackling, Phil. Create a disturbance. We'll go find Alan."

For Punchy that was quite a speech. I went over to his dark corner. Tommygun mags lay about, a rock, hollowed out in the shape of a bullet, powder bags, mallets, empty shells.

"Having a shot making gunpowder—of a sort—and refilling empty shells," Draycott explained as though he'd been mending a fuse wire. "Haven't got it to work yet. But this last safari sounds as though I ought to go in with what we have . . ."

A born scrounger, Punchy Draycott—and a man who would fabricate materials to scrounge where they did not exist.

"If only Charlie would come through!" I exclaimed in exasperation. "Who's down there now?"

"Taffy Llewellyn." Draycott was nipping cartridge cases over now with fastidious precision. "I stuck the broom handle with the red duster in as a marker; but then we got into the scrap with those beasts and it was knocked flying. It's somewhere around the right place."

"You must all have felt pretty ribby," I said.

No one answered. There was no need.

Then Tony Ufton said cheerfully: "It'll be daylight in an hour. We ought to get started. You want to see that city, Phil. It'll knock your eyeballs out."

There lay in this fresh exodus a pale and mocking ghost of that joyful exodus from my flat. These men now knew just what they were tangling with; but their spirit had not been broken. Thinking back, I saw that worry over Alison had distorted my own reactions to this world.

Could I help it if I worried about the girl?

We picked up Taffy Llewellyn prowling in a jungle clearing where a broom stick with a red duster tied to it projected incongruously from the grass.

Inconsequentially, Searles said: "We should have realised this couldn't be the Earth of prehistory with dinosaurs—there would be no grass. Hadn't been invented then."

I tore a page from my diary and wrote a quick note, stuck it on the broom handle. Then we all trooped off through the jungle aisles.

On the way we passed the bleached skeleton of some enormous brute that stretched it seemed for ages along the track.

"That was one of mine," said Stan Shaw. "Not much left of him now."

The armaments left to us were pitifully few. But our ace—the flier with Eggs and Bacon aboard—ghosted along behind.

Just as we cleared the belt of jungle the sun rose flaming and red over the far horizon and illuminated all the plain before. I stopped and whistled.

"Some sight, eh, Phil?"

That city was a sight.

However evil the Porvone might be and however vile their aims in coming to this world, they knew how to build a city. A single fluid movement of masonry and plastic, with every arch, every spire, every turret flowing from the perimeter wall upwards as though seeking to burst free of the bonding chains of gravity, the city rose lightly on the plain, an unflawed gem, floating it seemed on tenuous morning mists.

"And we're going in there to break it up, if we can," I said.

"Don't let that worry you," Ufton said grimly. "Nature paints her killers pretty colours, too."

What a forlorn little party we were! We stood there in a group on the edge of the forest, staring out across the plain where already slaves worked in bordered fields, looking on the city that dominated the plain as its masters dominated life.

With the flier dogging our steps, in the bright morning sun, we set out across that shining plain.

Four hours later and about halfway across the plain a flier nosed down the trees of an orange orchard—they *looked* like oranges—and Ufton and I despatched the mustardy occupants. Eggs transferred from the first flier.

"Not Eggs, clot," Punchy Draycott said amiably, climbing into the seat beside the Dump. "This is Bacon."

"Sorry. Haven't got used to distinguishing between 'em yet. Hope you enjoy the ride, Punchy."

"Your turn'll come, boy, don't fret."

By general consent we called a halt where an ivy-covered ruin sprawled, broken backed, beside a tinkling stream. Grey stone mottled with lichens of green and yellow and amber afforded cover. We dozed, talking quietly, waiting for the sun to leave the world to darkness—and to us.

"This ruin was probably a Litani villa," Searles said. "You have to feel sorry for them—"

"Alison was wondering about their lop-sided build. Accident or deliberate evolution, Steve? You're the expert."

"Oh, evolution, without a doubt." We all knew we were talking to fill a waiting silence no one wanted to hear. "Two arms on the left are useful and a tripod gait has advantages peculiar to itself. Our Earthly flat fish develop in a far more startlingly lop-sided fashion—lobsters' claws, too, aren't symmetrical." Searles ran a fine drift of dirt through his fingers. "And I'd guess the Litani always look so tired because of what is happening to their world and their ways. They are very paternalistic."

"Nice folk," Stan Shaw said quietly.

"That's true." Tony Ufton yawned most elegantly. "You should hear Steve on the Porvone. Talk about jaw-breaking polysyllables . . ."

"The Porvone," said Steve Searles. He sighed. "I've just got to lay hands on one of them."

"You watch out one don't wrap itself around your bonce, Steve, me lad," said Punchy Draycott. He was fiddling with his tommygun mags again.

seven

Just before full dark a procession wended into the deep shadow of the ruins. Smonen and Dumps, all armed, many with violet-ball coneguns, and, carried in state in an eight-Smonen sedan chair, Earl Bexley in person.

Bexley turned out to be a younger edition of Welling. Like all the Litani he aroused in me only feelings of pity and admiration and affection. His alien physiognomy charmed; I had not a shred of revulsion for his kind.

He spoke briefly to Ufton. Tony turned to me with a smile. "Seems they've all been waiting to have a crack at the city and now seems to be their chance. We can't deny them that, Phil—"

"Warn them that many may be killed!" I said harshly. "We value their assistance; but it must be freely given. We want friendship with them. We do not want recriminations afterwards."

Further quick and vigorous conversation followed. Ufton frowned. "I don't know if you've heard of Gezen—it's some sort of debased religion favoured by the Porvone. Some more rigorous Litani—Earl Bexley is one—feel the sort of hatred for Gezen that a medieval bishop felt for devil-worship. They want to stamp it out."

"That means, surely," broke in Searles, "stamping out the Porvone, too?"

"Suits me," I said.

An hour after sunset we set off.

Tony Ufton and Steve Searles rode the first flier with the thumbling from Earl Bexley's retinue. Punchy Draycott and I rode the second with Bacon. That left one spare seat in each flier. I had protested that Steve—and Jock McTaggart—after

their march in and even though Bacon had gone back for them, must be tired. Steve had waved that aside. Jock had merely wiped his moustache and gone to recharge his accumulators.

The fliers ghosted in through shallow darkness with no moon, the faintest phosphorescent discharge from their triangular plates shedding a pallid and eerie blue glow upon the smashed canopies. We'd chipped the jagged edges of glass away and they looked respectable. The night breathed warm and scented about us.

Ahead rose the city, a sparkling jewel, lambent and gleaming against the stars.

The two men in each flier lay down beneath the edge of the canopy, out of sight. The thumbings had smeared clayey mud over their bright fur and now seemed, to a casual glance, to be mustardy slaves of the Porvone. Each wore a glinting emerald sash taken from a dead Dump.

This silent waiting as the fliers cruised in towards the city rose a cold sweat all over me. I held the stock of my rifle and prayed. Soon the red brick arch of the lowest tier of the perimeter wall flowed past our heads. A torch glared briefly upon us ; then we sailed serenely into the city. I saw no sign of a gate ; but many mustardy Dumps with coneguns stood guard along the battlemented walls.

Bacon, our thumbing driver, had worked in this city before his escape and resurrection from the chemical thralldom imposed on him by the Porvone. Punchy Draycott spoke to him from time to time, relaying the information to me.

"He doesn't like the Porvone, Phil. Scared of 'em, yes ; but his mad's up. He's taking us to the initial slave pens."

"I'd like to know how the rest of the gang are getting on," I fretted. "Tony ought to be pulling his stunt about now—"

When the bangs and concussions had finished, Draycott said : "No sooner than the words were out of your mouth, Phil, me boy." He glanced up into the shaving mirror he'd wedged in the broken glass stripping. His face, ruffianly and bronzed, smiled with a very satisfied smile. "Y'know, Phil, I'm damned grateful to you. Glad I was in England the day you walked into the garage wanting to buy stores . . ." His eyes focussed on something in the mirror. "Hold it. Official looking flier heaving up. Big purple circle and star—Very Top People . . ."

He wasn't fooling anyone. Both our hands tightened on the flier's bulwark, the others on our guns, ready for a quick leap.

But Bacon had the answer. He spoke quickly, the twittering shrill of his voice bringing the smile back to Draycott's face.

"Okay, Phil,"—hoarsely—"he told 'em he was on an important mission—and then clammed up. Seems they have their inner rings and local bosses here, too."

The grenades had stirred the city. More fliers caterwauled past, draped in hoses and supporting tanks of water, from his mirror Draycott picked out a mass movement towards the gate we had entered. "They're a weird lot down there, Phil. And—there are men and women among 'em!"

"I can imagine. If you look closer you'll see their dinky little golden skull caps."

"Too right."

The initial slave markets turned out to be a wide compound, walled in red brick, naked and empty of life. Bacon twittered something and the flier spun away.

"All sold. If they sell 'em here. Bacon's taking us to the official registrar—"

"But we can't just knock on the door and ask him!" I felt awed horror at the calm effrontery of the idea. I'd go through with it, of course, even if my mouth was hanging open all the time.

"We've got to get as close as possible and then work on a Dump."

Doing that in this super scientific city was not the difficult task I had imagined. The city centre towered above us as we circled inclined ramps, spiralling inwards and upwards. Electric lighting, patchy down below, thickened into a single blaze the higher we went. Up here the numbers of men and women walking about, drifting past in fliers, astounded me.

"The blasted Porvone must go raiding through into our world on a largish scale," I said. "This maybe explains those disappearances people marvel at for nine days."

"And there are plenty of other life forms, too," reported Punchy from his mirror. "Real weirdies. Ugh!"

"Even so," I said slowly as the flier ghosted in through an archway curving above us in amber and black stripes, "even so, there's something odd about this city, an aura, a feeling—can't quite put my finger on it . . ."

"I'll tell you. It's a frontier city. Oh—forget all the fancy scientific trimmings. This is a city built by the Porvone in imitation of their own cities back home. You can smell the fear of the unknown breathing through the place."

And he was right.

Here was a great city, built like a single gem, with a circling wall, rising proudly above a plain where slaves toiled—this city acted as the focal point for all the Porvone activity for a great radius in Watkins' World, here were hidden the Portals of Life, here was a key factor in the wealth and power of the Porvone—and here ran fear and the shivering sense of the unknown.

It took Punchy to drag me back to a sense of proportion. "We mustn't let the others down, Phil. They've put on a crackerjack show. We're in and unspotted!"

"I only hope they come through all right. Wish we had some of that armament stored in my place . . ."

"Keep down!"

We both pancaked on the floor of the flier. In the far wall of the courtyard beyond that amber and black striped archway a long window blazed light down on us. Against the light thumbings moved. Then the flier carried us past and only the garish reflection showed through the smashed canopy.

"This is getting precarious," Punchy said in an aggrieved tone.

The tension mounted with every passing second. We penetrated a labyrinth of courtyards and narrow canyons between lightless walls, long corridors strip lighted in ultra-modern fashion and spaces so black the blue discharge from our triangular plates lit everything within the flier in a St. Elmo's fire of devilry.

"Where the hell's he taking us?"

"Registrar. Whatever that means."

"I hope he knows the way."

The flier abruptly nosed down, slowed, slid to a stop in a narrow alley. Grey granite walls rose on the left, yellow stone on the right. Down both walls brightly painted pipes conducted water into round openings. The walls rose all of four hundred feet. Their tops, to our pygmy vision, met in a dwindling perspective.

"Bacon says this is the back wall of the registry. Now we grab ourself a Dump."

We crouched in the pallid illumination of strip lighting fixed at long intervals along the walls, our hearts thumping, palms clammy, starting at the least noise ; waiting to jump on a thumbling alien from another world.

Our flier rested on the ground, silent. Yet, plainly, I could hear the penetrating hissing of a flier in motion. Punchy said quietly : " Another of 'em coming this way. Purple circle and star job. Trouble . . . "

A quick and twittering clamour arose. The Dumps in the patrolling flier bombarded Bacon with questions. Draycott watched. I hugged the floor of the flier and cursed my impotence to affect the issue.

The flier lurched. Looking up I saw a thin, skeleton hand claw over the broken edge of the door where glass had been knocked away. The Dump was climbing aboard.

Bacon said something. Immediately Draycott jumped up, drawing his revolver. In an instant I had joined him. His shot caught the climbing Dump in the middle, knocked him back. My bullet caught the driving Dump as he started up, expressionless, but with twig-like arms waving.

A violet ball struck the side of the flier from the conegun of the first dump, fired by reflex tightening of the trigger finger, bounced splashing to the ground. The sickly stink of processed violets filled the alley.

" They were no use, anyway—look ! " Punchy vaulted over the side, began legging up the alley. I followed, not knowing what we were doing.

Up ahead a blur of moving bodies resolved into Punchy sitting hard on the lap of a mustardy Dump, prostrate on the ground.

" Help me get him back to the flier, Phil. "

Bacon went to work at once. From his pouch he drew out a very professional looking hypodermic, broke the seal on a capsule, filled the hypo—even squirted a little to make sure it was working—then thrust it into some secret part of the mustardy Dump beneath the fur.

He said something. Draycott and I began clearing the dead Dumps away, bundling them into the water holes. The flier we could do little with, although I had been watching Bacon and felt I could handle one if necessary. We went back to our own flier.

The thumbling Punchy had caught lay on the deck. He wore, in addition to his glinting green scarf, a large black and white checked knapsack, slung at the back for all the world like a Japanese woman's rear appendage.

Draycott said: "That's his badge of office as well as his portfolio. He works for the Registrar General."

"We've got to get off the streets," I said. "If a Porvone happens along—"

"This fellow's our passport. Ah—" Punchy leant over the prostrate Dump, Bacon at his side.

Then both of them began talking nineteen to the dozen and the Registrar General's slave thumbling slowly opened his eyes, looked about, moved his twig-like arms—and I swear a great wash of relief and joy swept over him . . .

"His fur won't change back to its right colour for a day or so," Punchy said. "But he's right in the head again. And he's ready to go! Like all of the thumblings once they've been cleared of those damned chemicals, he aches to have a crack at the Porvone!"

More questions and answers followed and all the time I fretted with impatience and the fear of being caught here without a chance to hit back. Our lives now lay in the twig-like hands of a thumbling, so briefly re-converted to our way of thinking—as I watched the Dump padding swiftly back through the low doorway from whence he had come I couldn't help a shudder of dread at the thought he might betray us. It would be so easy . . .

"We've got to trust him, Phil!" Punchy might have been reading my thoughts. "We've been in this goddam world longer than you—and so far the thumblings have turned up trumps."

That short waiting period tested my thinning reserves of courage and determination far more stringently than any that had gone before. The narrow alley, the tall grinning walls, the faint furtive slither of the water, all filled me with revulsion, screamed frantically to me: "Trap! Trap!"

When at last the thumbling returned, the effort of sitting up, taking an interest, sapped me cruelly. I hadn't realised how stiffly I had been holding myself.

"He's done it, Phil!" Punchy swapped a flood of questions for answers. "The Porvone scientific mind is tidy and likes records. Welling and Alison and the others were taken to the

Dru Sencarver's palace. I've heard about these Drus—they're holy murder !"

"I met one," I said, swallowing hard to get the words out. "What are we waiting for ?"

"We'll have to take our new pal—"

"Of course."

The nightmare ride through the brilliance and darkness of an alien and hostile city continued. Strange smells sprang from the night to catch our breaths and bring tears to our eyes. Weird sounds thumped and pulsed through the fabric of the city. Deep below the ground nuclear engines poured out the floods of energy necessary to maintain this city's life. Higher and higher we ghosted. Two men and two aliens bent on as mad a mission as any conceived in either of their worlds—for this World of Watkins' was not home to Homo sapiens or to Dump.

The Dru Sencarver lived in a palace built into a single tower, springing from the penultimate level of the city, a projecting buttress of masonry and steel, pierced by hundreds of windows, crowned by a circular landing roof, commanding wide views of the littoral. The Dru Sencarver's tower palace was but one of a score that ringed the city's upper levels like toothed spikes of a crown.

We went in a little narrow broken-backed arch where light and power conduits entered and filthy water spilled out, channelled when free of the palace in open drains—once the Dru had finished with his detritus no one else worried about it. Science catered for the Top People—and there were no others—apart from slaves. And they didn't count, of course. That efficient water system spilling out into open gutters symbolised this city.

"Everything's going to plan so far," said Punchy, as we squeezed through between cables and water. "The damned Porvone don't stand a chance."

And, suddenly, I realised that what Punchy said was true.

I looked at the thumbling we had just released from thrall-dom. I couldn't really tell him from Bacon without the insignia but he pressed on eagerly. Reading an alien expression must be almost an impossibility without careful instruction ; yet I sensed—I knew—that these thumblings pressed on with the same fervour, the same determination.

I thought of the Dru Resencher, and pity and anger filled me. The city ruled by the Drus swarmed with slaves—and with deadly enemies, created at the prick of a hypodermic needle !

That resurrecting needle brought back to sanity three more Dumps before we stumbled across the one who could help us. He wore in addition to his glinting emerald sash, a short sleeveless jacket of purple material emblazoned in gilt thread with the semblance of a key. When he spoke with his true mind Draycott swung on me, there in the backstairs kingdom of the Dru Sencarver's palace.

"This is the feller, Phil ! That key means he's in charge of the cells—and that's where your pals are !"

"Let's go."

e i g h t

The thickness of those masonry walls astounded me. Here, almost at the apex of the Porvone city, building had been carried out as though to withstand a siege of centuries. The master of the keys—his name was Alar—hurried on padding feet animated by the same hatred of the Porvone driving all of us on, heading towards the cell block. Three times we had to silence mustardy thumbings—and each time Bacon or the Registrar General's ex-slave fired unerringly with captured coneguns. The crash of a rifle shot there we felt must bring the place about our ears.

"They think of Dumps under the spell of the Porvone chemicals as already dead," Draycott explained a point that had been worrying me. "If they can be resurrected, well, that's fine and dandy. But a dead mustardy Dump is preferable to a live one. They feel sorrow and pity ; but no hesitation."

"Poor little devils," I said, meaning more than that.

"The city must be alive with rumour and anxiety over what's happening out there. The lads must be kicking up quite a rumpus. I hope they have the same luck with Alan as we have so far with Alison—"

"You say the Registrar had no record of his capture ?"

"Not according to this thumbing. It was a chancy business, according to what he said. These little guys really have guts !"

The corridor debouched into a low-ceilinged room with wooden benches down one side and a long row of iron barred

cells down the other. In those cells paced, padded, sat, clawed, yawned, writhed a weird and frightening collection of alien life forms. I took in briefly the bizarre diversity of shape and colour, of arms and tentacles, of legs and slithery scales. This, then, was what an interstellar zoo must look like.

"Alar says Sencarver keeps his bodies here. Uses different sorts for different purposes. Likes to experiment."

"I'm anxious to meet Sencarver."

"Don't be distracted, laddie! We're here on a rescue mission—not one of revenge."

"Sorry, Punchy. But I'm so twisted around . . ."

Our thumbings had efficiently disposed of the guards. Out of that fracas we acquired half a dozen new allies; all armed.

Frantically I ran from cage to cage. Red eyes glared back at me. Fanged mouths opened savagely. Shrinking forms cowered back against the far walls. Smonen were there, a few Dumps, one or two Litani. But not a single man or woman. Desperate, I ran back, re-checking.

"We can't have come this far for nothing!" I shouted. "Punchy—we've got to find them!"

Draycott didn't answer me. He questioned closely a Litani who looked haggard and worn far beyond the stage reached by Welling. Alar joined in the conversation. I felt cut off, helpless, an ignorant fool unable to take part in these vital conversations.

"Hurry it up, Punchy!"

"Take it easy, Phil. They've been here. But the Dru's personal body servants took them away about half an hour ago—"

"So close! So damned close—and that means—"

"Phil! Pull yourself together!" Draycott gripped my biceps, squeezed hard, shook me. "She's going to be all right! Alar will lead us. We're going up there to get her!"

We freed the Smonen, the Dumps, the Litani. In a body we crowded from the cell block, started on the final climb. A roaring buzzed in my brain, a red madness that filled me with a killing rage. That suicidal insanity had to be conquered before we reached the Dru Sencarver; I had to be in complete control of myself, icy cool, ready to react with hair-trigger precision. It was a tough job.

Scarcely conscious of the great halls, the corridors, the softly carpeted passages through which we wended, I went with our throng up to the private apartments of the Dru Sencarver

Those we met on the way were converted—or consumed into dust by violet discharges from cone-guns.

“And all this,” Draycott said in a whisper, “because we had guns and could take over a flier!”

“We could do with a few more weapons,” I said, heavily, thinking of that store in my flat with longing.

“A big frontal attack on the Porvone wouldn’t come off, Phil. Don’t forget these people are super-scientists!”

Alar motioned to us. Everyone fell silent. Ahead a pierced stone screen showered drops of light across a marbled floor. We slithered silently up, peered through.

The scene unfolded in there took a little time to digest. Servitor Dumps stood about obsequiously. The whole chamber vaulted roof and groined walls, reeked of luxury, giant clusters of electric globes depended from the roof, costly rugs and silks lay flung carelessly across chairs and sofas. The place glittered with barbaric splendour.

To my left the whole wall glowed. Strange shapes showed against the glow, mechanical and electronic devices that were right out of my orbit. In the centre of that radiant wall a square opening, seven foot high and three feet wide, gaped black and forbidding, like the portal into the netherworld. Over it a single bulb shone a rich ruby red.

Punchy Draycott whispered: “Alar says that’s the Dru’s Portal of Life—”

“The gateway into other worlds!”

“Yes. And it’s in operation now.”

The hush deepened, shot through by the crackle of electricity. The air charged heavily, like a summer evening before a storm.

The tension in that magnificent apartment reached through to us, crouched ferally in hiding, sawed at our nerves as it held everyone rigid and waiting beyond.

The light over the Portal flickered. It cycled rapidly, changed to amber and then flashed back to a steady ruby gleam.

And a man walked through that ebony opening—a man dressed in silky top hat, white tie and tails, carrying a silver knobbed cane—a man stepped through the Porvone Portal of life into the apartment, stepping through from another world.

Dumps ran up, took the cane, took the top hat. They proffered drinks in curious goblets set on golden trays. One pushed forward a great wing chair. The man ignored them all. As he removed his hat the golden shining glory of a Porvone, stretched

skull tight over the man's head, reflected the massed lights of the chamber.

My hands trembled on the rifle and I half lifted the weapon. Punchy put a hand on mine, pressed it down.

"Wait!"

Once more I was in the presence of an alien being whose body constituted a skin-tight membrane, whose power rose all about me in the manifestation of this super-city, who could travel through inter-dimensional doorways from world to world in search of wealth and power, whose every whim would be instantly satisfied and who wielded with casual savagery the authority of life and death.

Other men and women crowded through the Portal—and some did not wear the golden skull cap of a Porvone. These stood in a daze, uncomprehending, foolish, heads hanging. Most of them were dressed for an evening's entertainment; not flashily but with the sober gaiety of London suburbanites indulging in an evening on the West End.

Each Porvone removed his hat as soon as he was through the Portal. Each one carried a small hand torch; but I noticed the wires running from it to packs—briefcases, suitcases, and one or two with square black packs strapped to their shoulders. These latter were not dressed up for a sham evening's entertainment; they carried coneguns and wore scale armour scintillating and dripping gems.

"They've been on a raid," Punchy said viciously. "Look at the poor devils they've caught."

"Those torches must be the paralysers beams."

"Yeah. We'll have to knock them over first . . ."

Just who started the shooting I couldn't say. One thing was certain, I didn't blame the dumps for opening up with their coneguns. Something of their frustrated anger at being held slaves, thrall'd by evil chemical injections, lashed across that barbaric chamber. The stink of processed violets filled my nostrils. Porvone dropped writhing as violet ooze flowed over their borrowed bodies. Mustardy Dumps ran shrieking in every direction, seeking to escape that deadly dew of violet. The captives stood docilely all through the scene of stark bedlam. Noise and stink and glitter scourged that chamber with cleansing fire.

The man in evening clothes—the body who hosted the Dru Sencarver—ran chestily for an alcove. Bacon, beside Draycott, lined him up and landed a violet ball full on that glistening white shirtfront. The man fell to the floor. I watched, fascinated.

The body lay relaxed and unstirring as the violet goo engulfed it. But the Dru—the Dru ! The golden skin of the Porvone rippled as though shaken like a sheet ; the tail withdrew flickeringly from the dying man's spinal column. Then, like an underwater manta ray on a smaller scale, the Porvone hopped, glided and flew with a glinting undulation away from that scene of strife. I could only imagine the enormous physical effort made by the Porvone, the fierce desire to escape forcing a body designed to prey on other stronger bodies to wriggle and struggle free.

Punchy Draycott touched me on the arm.

“ Look, Phil ! Over there—is that—?”

I dragged my eyes away from the Dru. Huddled beside the opposite doorway where Porvone jostled to escape, were struck by violet balls, screamed and died—a little group waited dumbly for the end. In all that bedlam I couldn't mistake Alison. She and Welling and Joli and a few other men and women stood, herded in by guard Dumps. Those Dumps now stared about with their round eyes wide, not understanding what was going on, responding to their last orders. I stood up, jerkily shaking, the roaring in my head louder than a dozen Victoria Falls.

“ They've been brought here for the Porvone to change into ! The bodies they went raiding with are tired. *Come on, Punchy !*”

I ran straight across that hall filled with its bedlam, not knowing how I crossed the stone screen, dodging it seemed with consummate ease flying violet balls. I brought the rifle up as I went and brought the butt down—hard—on the rippling golden body of the Dru Sencarver. The metal butt plate slogged solidly through thin flesh, clanged against the marble floor. I didn't bother to watch the Dru as he died.

Alison saw me.

She lifted her arms ; her face, that had been grey and slack and dulled with hopeless resignation, blossomed now like those blossoms adorning the trees of Kent where we had first met. her eyes sparkled with the tears she had been too proud—or too obstinate—to shed before.

There was no time to take her in my arms. The job was still unfinished.

"Are you all right?"

"Phil. Oh—*Phil*!"

"Good. That's enough of that, then." The storm of violet died down in the chamber as the Porvone fled or were cut down, the mustardy Dumps following the examples of their masters. I turned to the old Litani. "I hope you are still all right, Welling. We were damned lucky to find you."

"You are most welcome." Welling had possessed himself of a knobbly stick for support in place of his own great golden staff. "We had been kept for the Porvone—these other men and women of your world and us—ready for them to possess when they returned through the Portal of Life."

"But, Phil!" said Alison, clinging to my arm. "The wonderful thing, the incredible thing, is that Professor Watkins is with us! He has been used by the Porvone; but he's still—"

A familiar voice, husky, tired; but filled now with renewed vigour, broke in.

"If it isn't our old fire-brand Phil! And I always thought you knew as much about maths as a chimpanzee!"

"Thanks for the kind words, Alan—"

"Alan!" Punchy Draycott seized Watkins' arm, pumped his hand up and down. "You're looking awful! But are we glad to see you!"

"Listen to me!" Alan Watkins did look awful; but the old ring of command shocked iron into his voice. "Miss Gilbert and I have discussed my equations, sitting in our cells. We think we can control the effect! Right now we must all go through that Portal of Life over there, return to our Earth—"

"But—hey, wait a minute!" Punchy said. "What about the Dumps, and the Litani? They won't want to—"

"And what about the other lads prowling the city?" I stared at the Portal of Life. Through that black opening in a veil of fire lay the entrance to safety and sanity.

A crackle of conversation sounded and Welling said: "We wish you to return to your own world. We can fight our way back through the way you came. My Dumps can do it!"

I gave a last long look at that Portal. "Alison—you and Alan go through there! That's an order! I have a job to finish, and Punchy will—"

"I'm with you, Phil."

We gave Alan Watkins and Alison no time to argue. They were all in, exhausted by their ordeal. I watched them step through the Portal of Life. Then Watkins reappeared, face a mask of amazement.

"Hey, Phil. What do you know—right into a pukka office in the new Carshalton Tower—the Porvone's secret entrance into London! No wonder they could operate—"

"Get through, Alan! And go around to my flat, fast!"

Then the rest of us left that room where death had stalked on violet wings, where men and women and Dumps had wafted into dust motes. No sign remained of our visit save the thin and shrivelled body of the Dru Sencarver.

Back the way we had come we went. Opposition was violet—wafted away or resurrected. A grim elation filled me. We'd done the job—we'd beaten these super-scientific aliens.

Shooting began again as soon as we started up the last main street towards the gate. Rifle shots, the crash of tommyguns and Brens, the crish-crash of exploding grenades carried clearly to us as we hurried along. A flier zoomed down on us, flaunting the purple circle and star. A stab of fire scorched from the gate and the flier exploded in a spectacular ball of flame.

"That was a bazooka!" Punchy yelled.

"Charlie Hawtrey and the lads!" I was beside myself now. "They got through!"

The maniacal hammer of tommyguns and the steady thunder of brens surrounded us in a wall of fire. Just inside the gate the lads of the old armoured div had set up a bridghead. I saw their familiar faces, lit streakily in the reflections of stammering weapons, and I exulted.

The Porvone had received a most unexpected and nasty set back. We'd really given them a thick ear! Working in a smooth routine, we pulled back from the gate, sharpshooters giving yellow-beam-armed Porvone no time to operate their paralysis rays. We streamed back into the protective darkness of the plain and we guessed no Porvone or mustard coloured Dump would follow us there.

The journey back to the rendezvous point allowed us no respite; but it was no period of anti-climax or of let down. We talked and laughed as we slogged along. Everyone felt great. A dreadful menace hung over our world; but right then all we could feel was the uplifting confidence of men who have fought

through the valley of the shadow and have emerged victorious.

In the clearing where a broom handle supported a red duster we said goodbye to Welling and Bexley and their faithful Smonen and Dumps.

"But we'll be back," said Steve Searles fervently. "We've a lot to learn about your world—"

"Yes—and we have to cleanse it of the Porvone!" said Punchy Draycott for us all.

Just before we all stepped through the point—a short but immeasurably important distance away—where Hawtrey had set up his marker, Tony Ufton had the last word.

He tipped his palm leaf hat graciously.

"Thank you for being such good friends to us," he said to Earl Welling and Earl Bexley, smiling around on them and the others crowding up to say goodbye. "It's been a most enjoyable holiday."

And then we stepped through the Seventh Stair, back to the world of our birth, back out of a primitive jungle and another world where golden skull-cap Porvone sought to dominate and destroy. We all trooped back up those Underground steps, laughing and shouting, caring not a fig for the majestic figure in blue waiting for us at the top.

Even as he took out his notebook I was running past him towards my flat—and Alison.

—Frank Brandon.



*Here is a further adventure of Elric of
Melnibone in which he and Moonglum
enter the dreaded forest of Troos—and
Elric wins a wife*

KINGS IN DARKNESS

BY MICHAEL MOORCOCK

*Three Kings in Darkness lie,
Gutharan of Org, and I,
Under a bleak and sunless sky—
The third Beneath the Hill.
—Song of Veerkad*

o n e

It was Elric, Lord of the lost and sundered Empire of Melnibone, who rode like a fanged wolf from a trap—all slaving madness and mirth. He rode from Nadsokor, City of Beggars, and there was hate in his wake. The citizens had judged him rightly for what he was—a nigromancer of superlative powers. Now they hounded him and also the grotesque little man who rode laughing at Elric's side; Moonglum the Outlander, from Elwher and the unmapped East.

The flames of brands devoured the velvet of the night as the yelling, ragged throng pushed their bony nags in pursuit of the pair.

Starvings and tattered jackals that they were, there was strength in their gaudy numbers and long knives and bone bows glinted in the brandlight. They were too strong for a couple of men to fight, too few to represent serious danger in a hunt, so Elric and Moonglum had chosen to leave the city without dispute and now sped towards the full and rising moon which stabbed its sickly beams through the darkness to show them the disturbing waters of the Varkalk River and a chance of escape from the incensed mob.

They had half a mind to stand and face the mob, since the Varkalk was their only alternative. But they knew well what the beggars would do to them, whereas they were uncertain what would become of them once they had entered the river. The horses reached the sloping banks of the Varkalk and reared, with hooves lashing.

Cursing, the two men spurred the steeds and forced them down towards the water. Into the river the horses plunged, snorting and spluttering. Into the river which led a roaring course towards the hell-spawned Forest of Troos which lay within the borders of Org, country of necromancy and rotting, ancient evil.

Elric blew water away from his mouth and coughed. "They'll not follow us to Troos, I think," he shouted at his companion.

Moonglum said nothing. He only grinned, showing his white teeth and the unhidden fear in his eyes. The horses swam strongly with the current and behind them the ragged mob shrieked in frustrated blood-lust while some of their number laughed and jeered.

"Let the forest do our work for us!"

Elric laughed back at them, wildly, as the horses swam on down the dark, straight river, wide and deep, towards a sun-starved morning, cold and spiky with ice. Scattered, slim-peaked crags loomed on either side of the flat plain, through which the river ran swiftly. Green-tinted masses of jutting blacks and browns spread colour through the rocks and the grass was waving on the plain as if for some purpose. Through the dawnlight, the beggar crew chased along the banks, but eventually gave up their quarry to return, shuddering, to Nadsokor.

When they had gone, Elric and Moonglum made their mounts swim towards the banks and climb them, stumbling,

to the top where rocks and grass had already given way to sparse forest land which rose starkly on all sides, staining the earth with sombre shades. The foliage waved jerkily, as if alive—sentient.

It was a forest of malignantly erupting blooms, blood-coloured and sickly-mottled. A forest of bending, sinuously smooth trunks, black and shiny ; a forest of spiked leaves of murky purples and gleaming greens—certainly an unhealthy place if judged only by the odour of rotting vegetation which was almost unbearable, impinging as it did upon the fastidious nostrils of Elric and Moonglum.

Moonglum wrinkled his nose and jerked his head in the direction they had come. "Back now?" he enquired. "We can avoid Troos and cut swiftly across a corner of Org to be in Bakshaan in just over a day. What say you, Elric?"

Elric frowned. "I don't doubt they'd welcome us in Bakshaan with the same warmth we received in Nadsokor. They'll not have forgotten the destruction we wrought there—and the wealth we acquired from their merchants. No, I have a fancy to explore the forest a little. I have heard tales of Org and its unnatural forest and should like to investigate the truth of them. My blade and sorcery will protect us, if necessary."

Moonglum sighed. "Elric—this once, let us not court the danger."

Elric smiled icily. His scarlet eyes blazed out of his dead white skin with peculiar intensity. "Danger? It can bring only death."

"Death is not to my liking, just yet," Moonglum said. "The fleshpots of Bakshaan, or if you prefer—Jadmar—on the other hand . . ."

But Elric was already urging his horse onward, heading for the forest. Moonglum sighed and followed.

Soon dark blossoms hid most of the sky, which was dark enough, and they could see only a little way in all directions. The rest of the forest seemed vast and sprawling ; they could sense this, though sight of most of it was lost in the depressing gloom.

Moonglum recognised the forest from descriptions he had heard from mad-eyed travellers who drank purposefully in the shadows of Nadsokor's taverns.

"This is the forest of Troos, sure enough," he said to Elric. "It's told of how the Doomed Folk released tremendous forces upon the earth and caused terrible changes among men, beasts and vegetation. This forest is the last they created, and the last to perish. They must have resented the planet giving them birth."

"A child will always hate its parents at certain times," Elric said impassively.

"Children of whom to be extremely wary, I should think," Moonglum retorted. "Some say that when they were at the peak of their power, they had no Gods to frighten them."

"A daring people, indeed," Elric replied, with a faint smile. "They have my respect. But their lack of Gods and fear was probably our downfall, if not theirs. Now fear and the Gods are back and that, at least, is comforting."

Moonglum puzzled over this for a short time, and then, eventually, said nothing.

He was beginning to feel uneasy.

The place was full of malicious rustlings and whispers, though no living animal inhabited it, as far as they could tell. There was a discomfiting absence of birds, rodents or insects and, though they normally had no love for such creatures, they would have appreciated their company in the disconcerting forest.

In a quavering voice, Moonglum began to sing a song in the hope that it would keep his spirits up and his thoughts off the lurking forest.

"A grin and a word is my trade ;

From these, my profit is made.

Though my body's not tall and my courage is small,

My fame will take longer to fade."

So singing, with his natural amiability returning, Moonglum rode after the man he regarded as a friend—a friend who possessed something akin to mastery over the little man, though neither admitted it.

Elric smiled at Moonglum's song. "To sing of one's own lack of size and absence of courage is not an action designed to ward off one's enemies, Moonglum."

"But this way I offer no provocation," Moonglum replied glibly. "If I sing of my shortcomings, I am safe. If I were to boast of my talents, then someone might consider this to be a challenge and decide to teach me a lesson."

"True," Elric assented gravely, "and well-spoken."

He began pointing at certain blossoms and leaves, remarking upon their alien tint and texture, referring to them in words which Moonglum could not understand, though he knew the words to be part of a sorcerer's vocabulary. The albino seemed to be untroubled by the fears which beset the Eastlander, but often, Moonglum knew, appearances with Elric could hide the opposite of what they indicated.

They stopped for a short break while Elric sifted through some of the samples he had torn from trees and plants. He carefully placed his prizes in his belt-pouch but would say nothing of why he did so to Moonglum.

"Come," he said, "Troos's mysteries await us."

But then a new voice, a woman's, said softly from the gloom: "Save the excursion for another day, strangers."

Elric reined his horse, one hand at *Stormbringer's* hilt. The voice had had an unusual effect upon him. It had been low, deep and had, for a moment, sent the pulse in his throat throbbing. Incredibly, he sensed that he was suddenly standing on one of Fate's roads, but where the road would take him, he did not know. Quickly, he controlled his mind and then his body and looked towards the shadows from where the voice had come.

"You are very kind to offer us advice, madame," he said sternly. "Come, show yourself and give explanation . . ."

She rode out then, very slowly, on a black-coated gelding that pranced with a power she could barely restrain. Moonglum drew an appreciative breath for although heavy-featured, she was incredibly beautiful. Her face and bearing was patrician, her eyes were grey-green, combining enigma and innocence. She was very young. For all her obvious womanhood and beauty, Moonglum aged her at seventeen or little more.

Elric frowned: "Do you ride alone?"

"I do now," she replied, trying to hide her obvious astonishment at the albino's weird lack of colouring. "I need aid—protection. Men who will escort me safely to Karlaak. There, they will be paid."

"Karlaak, by the Weeping Waste? It lies the other side of Ilmiora, a hundred leagues away and a week's travelling at speed." Elric did not wait for her to reply to this statement.

"We are not hirelings, madame. We are noblemen in our own lands."

"Then you are bound by the vows of chivalry, sir, and cannot refuse my request."

Elric laughed shortly. "Chivalry, madame? We come not from the upstart nations of the South with their strange codes and rules of behaviour. We are nobles of older stock whose actions are governed by our own desires. You would not ask what you do, if you knew our names."

She wetted her full lips with her tongue and said almost timidly: "You are . . .?"

"Elric of Melnibone, madame, called Elric Womanslayer in the West and this is Moonglum of Elwher; he has no conscience."

She gasped. "I have heard of you. There are stories—legends—the white-faced reaver, the hell-driven sorcerer with a blade that drinks the souls of men . . ."

"Aye, that's true. And however magnified they are with the retelling, they cannot hint, those tales, at the darker truths which lie in their origin. Now, madame, do you still seek our aid?" Elric's voice was gentle, without menace, as he saw that she was very much afraid, although she had managed to control the signs of fear and her lips were tight with determination.

"I have no choice. I am at your mercy. My father, the Senior Senator of Karlaak, is very rich. Karlaak is called the City of the Jade Towers, as you will know, and such rare jades and ambers we have. Many could be yours."

"Be careful, madame, lest you anger me," warned Elric, although Moonglum's bright eyes lighted with avarice. "We are not nags to be hired or goods to be bought. Besides which," he smiled disdainfully, "I am from crumbling Imrryr, the Dreaming City, from the Isle of the Dragon, hub of Ancient Melnibone, and I know what beauty really is. Your baubles cannot tempt one who has looked upon the milky Heart of Arioeh, upon the blinding iridescence that throbs from the Ruby Throne, of the languorous and unnameable colours in the Actorios stone of the Ring of Kings. These are more than jewels, madame—they contain the life-stuff of the universe."

"I apologise, Lord Elric, and to you Sir Moonglum."

Elric laughed, almost with affection. "We are grim clowns, lady, but the Gods of Luck aided our escape from Nadsokor and we owe them a debt. We'll escort you to Karlaak, City of the Jade Towers, and explore the Forest of Troos another time."

Her thanks was tempered with a wary look in her eyes.

"And now we have made introductions," said Elric, "perhaps you would be good enough to give your name and tell us your story."

"I am Zarozinia from Karlaak, a daughter of the Voashoon, the most powerful clan in South Eastern Ilmiora. We have kinsmen in the trading cities on the coasts of Pikarayd and I went with two cousins and my uncle to visit them."

"A perilous journey, Lady Zarozinia."

"Aye and there are not only natural dangers, sir. Two weeks ago we made our goodbyes and began the journey home. Safely we crossed the Straits of Vilmir and there employed men-at-arms, forming a strong caravan to journey through Vilmir and so to Ilmiora. We skirted Nadsokor since we had heard that the City of Beggars is inhospitable to honest travellers . . ."

Here, Elric smiled: "And sometimes to dishonest travellers, as we can appreciate."

Again the expression on her face showed that she had some difficulty in equating his obvious good humour with his evil reputation. "Having skirted Nadsokor," she continued, "we came this way and reached the borders of Org wherein, of course, Troos lies. Very warily we travelled, knowing dark Org's reputation, along the fringes of the forest. And then we were ambushed and our hired men-at-arms deserted us."

"Ambushed, eh?" broke in Moonglum. "By whom, madame, did you know?"

"By their unsavoury looks and squat shapes they seemed native Orgians. They fell upon the caravan and my uncle and cousins fought bravely but were slain. One of my cousins slapped the rump of my gelding and sent it galloping so that I could not control it. I heard—terrible screams—mad, giggling shouts—and when I at last brought my horse to a halt, I was lost. Later I heard you approach and waited in fear for you to pass, thinking you also were Orgians, but when I heard your accents and some of your speech, I thought that you might help me."

"And help you we shall, madame," said Moonglum bowing gallantly from the saddle. "And I am indebted to you for convincing Lord Elric here of your need. But for you, we should be deep in this awful forest by now and experiencing strange terrors no doubt. I offer my sorrow for your dead kinfolk and assure you that you will be protected from now onwards by more than swords and brave hearts, for sorcery can be called up if needs be."

"Let's hope there'll be no need," frowned Elric.

"You talk blithely of sorcery, friend Moonglum—you who hate me to use the art."

Moonglum grinned.

"I was consoling the young lady, Elric. And I've had occasion to be grateful for your horrid powers, I'll admit. Now I suggest that we make camp for the night and so refreshed be on our way at dawn."

"I'll agree to that," said Elric, glancing almost with embarrassment at the girl. Again he felt the pulse in his throat begin to throb and this time he had more difficulty in controlling it.

The girl also seemed fascinated by the albino. There was an attraction between them which might be strong enough to throw both their destinies along wildly different paths than any they had guessed.

Night came again quickly, for the days were short in those parts. While Moonglum tended the fire, nervously peering around him, Zarozinia, her richly embroidered cloth-of-gold gown shimmering in the firelight, walked gracefully to where Elric sat sorting the herbs he had collected. She glanced at him cautiously and then seeing that he was absorbed, stared at him with open curiosity.

He looked up and smiled faintly, his eyes for once unprotected, his strange face frank and pleasant. "Some of these are healing herbs," he said, "and others are used in summoning spirits. Yet others give unnatural strength to the imbibers and some turn men mad. They will be useful to me."

She sat down beside him, her thick-fingered hands pushing her black hair back. Her full breasts lifted and fell rapidly.

"Are you really the terrible evil-bringer of the legends, Lord Elric? I find it hard to credit."

"I have brought evil to many places," he said, "but usually there has already been evil to match mine. I seek no excuses, for I know what I am and I know what I have done. I have slain malignant sorcerers and destroyed oppressors, but I have also been responsible for slaying fine men, and a woman, my cousin, whom I loved, I killed—or my sword did."

"And you are master of your sword."

"Yes—perhaps. I often wonder. Without it, I am helpless." He put his hand around *Stormbringer's* hilt. "I should be grateful to it." Once again his red eyes seemed to become deeper, protecting some bitter emotion which was rooted at the core of his soul.

"I'm sorry if I revived unpleasant recollection . . ."

"Do not feel sorry, Lady Zarozinia. The pain is within me—you did not put it there. In fact I'd say you relieve it greatly by your presence."

Half-startled, she glanced at him and smiled. "I am no wanton, sir," she said, "but . . ."

He got up quickly.

"Moonglum, is the fire going well?"

"Aye, Elric. She'll stay in for the night." Moonglum cocked his head on one side. It was unlike Elric to make such empty queries, but Elric said nothing further so the Eastlander shrugged, turned away to check his gear.

Since he could think of little else to say, Elric turned and said quietly, urgently: "I'm a killer and a thief, not fit to . . ."

"Lord Elric, I am . . ."

"You are infatuated by a legend, that is all."

"No! If you feel what I feel, then you'll know it's more."

"You are young."

"Old enough."

"Beware. I must fulfil my destiny."

"Your destiny?"

"It is no destiny at all, but an awful thing called doom. And I have no pity at all except when I see something in my own soul. Then I have pity—and I pity. But I hate to look and this is part of the doom which drives me. Not Fate, nor the Stars, nor Men, nor Demons, nor Gods. Look at me, Zarozinia—it is Elric, poor white chosen plaything of the Gods of Time—Elric of Melniboné who causes his own gradual and terrible destruction."

"It is suicide!"

"Aye. Suicide of a dreadful sinning kind, for I drive myself to slow death. And those who go with me suffer also."

"You speak falsely, Lord Elric—from guilt-madness."

"Because I am guilty, Lady."

"And does Sir Moonglum go to doom with you?"

"He is unlike others—he is indestructible in his own self-assurance."

"I am confident, also, Lord Elric."

"But your confidence is that of youth, it is different."

"Need I lose it with my youth?"

"You have strength. You are as strong as we are. I'll grant you that."

She opened her arms, rising. "Then be reconciled, Elric of Melniboné."

And he was. He seized her greedily, kissed her with a deeper need than that of passion. For the first time, Cymoril of Imrryr was forgotten as they dropped to the soft turf, oblivious of Moonglum who polished away at his curved sword with wry jealousy.

They all slept and the fire waned.

Elric, in his joy, had forgotten, or not heeded, that he had a watch to take and Moonglum, who had no source of strength but himself, stayed awake for as long as he could but sleep overcame him.

In the shadows of the awful trees, figures moved with shambling caution.

The misshapen men of Org began to creep inwards towards the sleepers.

Then Elric opened his eyes, aroused by instinct, stared at Zarozinia's peaceful face beside him, moved his eyes without turning his head and saw the danger. He rolled over, grasped *Stormbringer* and tugged the runeblade from its sheath. The sword hummed, as if in anger at being awakened.

"Moonglum! Danger!" Elric bellowed in fear, for he had more to protect than his own life. The little man's head jerked up. His curved sabre was already across his knees and he jumped to his feet, ran towards Elric as the Orgians closed in.

"I apologise," he said.

"My fault, I . . ."

And then the Orgians were at them. Elric and Moonglum stood over the girl as she came awake, saw the situation and

did not scream. Instead she looked around for a weapon but found none. She remained still, where she was, the only thing to do.

Smelling like offal, the gibbering Orgians, some dozen of them, slashed at Elric and Moonglum with heavy blades like cleavers, long and dangerous.

Stormbringer whined and smote through a cleaver, cut into an Orgian's neck and beheaded him. Blood gurgled from the corpse as it slumped back across the fire. Moonglum ducked beneath a howling cleaver, lost his balance, fell, slashed at his opponent's legs and hamstringed him so that he collapsed shrieking. Moonglum stayed on the ground and lunged upwards, taking another in the heart. Then he sprang to his feet and stood shoulder to shoulder with Elric while Zarozinia got up behind them.

"The horses," grunted Elric. "If it's safe, try to get them."

There were still seven Orgians standing and Moonglum groaned as a cleaver sliced flesh from his left arm, retaliated, pierced the man's throat, turned slightly and sheared off another's face. They pressed forward, taking the attack to the incensed Orgians. His left hand covered with his own blood, Moonglum painfully pulled his long poignard from its sheath and held it with his thumb along the handle, blocked an opponent's swing, closed in and killed him with a ripping upward thrust of the dagger, the action of which caused his wound to pound with agony.

fin

Elric held his great runesword in both hands and swung it in a semi-circle, hacking down the howling misshapen things. Zarozinia darted towards the horses, leaped on to her own and led the other two towards the fighting men. Elric smote at another and got into his saddle, thanking his own forethought to leave the equipment on the horses in case of danger. Moonglum quickly joined him and they thundered out of the clearing.

"The saddle-bags," Moonglum called in greater agony than that created by his wound. "We've left the saddle-bags!"

"What of it? Don't press your luck, my friend."

"But all our treasure's in them!"

Elric laughed, partly in relief, partly from real humour. "We'll retrieve them, friend, never fear."

"I know you, Elric. You've no value for the realities."

But even Moonglum was laughing as they left the enraged Orgians behind them and slowed to a canter.

Elric reached and hugged Zarozinia. "You have the courage of your noble clan in your veins," he said.

"Thank you," she replied, pleased with the compliment, "but we cannot match such swordmanship as that displayed by you and Moonglum. It was fantastic."

"Thank the blade," he said shortly.

"No. I will thank you. I think you place too much reliance upon that hell weapon, however powerful it is."

"I need it."

"For what?"

"For my own strength and, now, to give strength to you."

"I'm no vampire," she smiled, "and need no such fearful strength as that supplies."

"Then be assured that I do," he told her gravely. "You would not love me if the blade did not give me what I need. I am like a spineless sea-thing without it."

"I do not believe that, but will not dispute with you now."

They rode for a while without speaking.

Later, they stopped, dismounted, and Zarozinia put herbs that Elric had given her upon Moonglum's wounded arm and began to bind it.

Elric was thinking deeply. The forest rustled with macabre, sensuous sounds. "We're in the heart of Troos," he said, "and our intention to skirt the forest has been forestalled. I have it in mind to call on the King of Org and so round off our visit."

Moonglum laughed. "Shall we send our swords along first? And bind our own hands?" His pain was already eased by the herbs which were having quick effect.

"I mean it. We owe, all of us, much to the Orgians. They slew Zarozinia's uncle and cousins, they wounded you and they now have our treasure. We have many reasons for asking the King for recompense. Also, they seem stupid and should be easy to trick."

"Aye. The king will pay us back for our lack of common-sense by tearing our limbs off."

"I'm in earnest. I think we should go."

"I'll agree that I'd like our wealth returned to us. But we cannot risk the lady's safety, Elric."

"I am to be Elric's wife, Moonglum. Therefore if he visits the King of Org, I shall come too."

Moonglum lifted an eyebrow. "A quick courtship."

"She speaks the truth, however. We shall all go to Org—and sorcery will protect us from the King's uncalled-for wrath."

"And still you wish for death and vengeance, Elric," shrugged Moonglum mounting. "Well, it's all the same to me since your roads, whatever else, are profitable ones. You may be the Lord of Bad Luck by your own reckoning, but you bring good luck to me, I'll say that."

"No more courting death," smiled Elric, "but we'll have some revenge, I hope."

"Dawn will be with us soon," Moonglum said. "The Orgian citadel lies six hours ride from here by my working, South-South-East by the Ancient Star, if the map I memorised in Nadsokor was correct."

"You have an instinct for direction that never fails, Moonglum. Every caravan should have such a man as you."

"We base an entire philosophy on the stars in Elwher," Moonglum replied. "We regard them as the master plan for everything that happens on Earth. As they revolve around the planet they see all things, past, present and future. They are our Gods."

"Predictable Gods, at least," said Elric and they rode off towards Org with light hearts considering the enormity of their risk.

t h r e e

Little was known of the tiny kingdom of Org save that the Forest of Troos lay within its boundaries and to that, other nations felt, it was welcome. The people were unpleasant to look upon, for the most part, and their bodies were stunted and strangely altered. Legend had it that they were the descendants of the Doomed Folk who had wrought such destruction upon the Earth an entire Time Cycle before. Their rulers, it was said, were shaped like normal men insofar as their outward bodily appearance went, but their minds were warped more horribly than the limbs of their subjects.

The inhabitants were few and were generally scattered, ruled by their king from his citadel which was also called Org.

It was for this citadel that Elric and his companions rode and, as they did so, Elric explained how he planned to protect them all from the Orgians.

In the forest he had found a particular leaf which, when used with certain invocations (which were harmless in that the invoker was in little danger of being harmed by the spirits he marshalled) would invest that person, and anyone else to whom he gave the drug distilled from the leaf, temporary invulnerability.

The spell somehow reknitted the skin and flesh structure so that it could withstand any edge and almost any blow. Elric explained, in a rare garrulous mood, how the drug and spell combined to achieve the effect, but his archaicisms and esoteric words meant little to the other two.

They stopped an hour's ride from where Moonglum expected to find the citadel so that Elric could prepare the drug and invoke the spell.

He worked swiftly over a small fire, using an alchemist's pestle and mortar, mixing the shredded leaf with a little water. As the brew bubbled on the fire, he drew peculiar runes on the ground, some of which were twisted into such alien forms that they seemed to disappear into a different dimension and reappear beyond it.

"Bone and blood and flesh and sinew,
Spell and spirit bind anew;
Potent potion work the life charm,
Keep its takers safe from harm."

So Elric chanted as a small pink cloud formed in the air over the fire, wavered, reformed into a spiral shape which curled downwards into the bowl. The brew spluttered and then was still. The albino sorcerer said: "An old boyhood spell, so simple that I'd near forgotten it. The leaf for the potion grows only in Troos and therefore it is rarely possible to perform."

The brew, which had been liquid, had now solidified and Elric broke it into small pellets. "Too much," he warned, "taken at one time is poison, and yet the effect can last for several hours. Not always, though, but we must accept that small risk." He handed both of them a pellet which they received dubiously. "Swallow them just before we reach the citadel," he told them, "or in the event of the Orgians finding us first."

Then they mounted and rode on again.

Some miles to the South East of Troos, a blind man sang a grim song in his sleep and so woke himself . . .

They reached the brooding citadel of Org at dusk. Guttural, drooling voices shouted at them from the battlements of the square-cut ancient dwelling place of the Kings of Org. The thick rock oozed moisture and was corroded by lichen and sickly, mottled moss. The only entrance large enough for a mounted man to pass through was reached by a path almost a foot deep in evil-smelling black mud.

"What's your business at the Royal Court of Gutheran the Mighty?"

They could not see who asked the question.

"We seek hospitality and an audience with your liege," called Moonglum cheerfully, successfully hiding his nervousness. "We bring important news to Org."

A twisted face peered down from the battlements. "Enter strangers and be welcome," it said unwelcomingly.

The heavy wooden drawgate shifted upwards to allow them entrance and the horses pushed their way slowly through the mud and so into the courtyard of the citadel.

Overhead, the grey sky was a racing field of black tattered clouds which streamed towards the horizon as if to escape the horrid boundaries of Org and the disgusting Forest of Troos.

The courtyard was covered, though not so deeply, with the same foul mud as had impaired their progress to the citadel. It was full of heavy, unmoving shadow. On Elric's right, a flight of steps went up to an arched entrance which was hung, partially, with the same unhealthy lichen he had seen on the outer walls and, also, in the Forest of Troos.

Through this archway, brushing at the lichen with a pale, beringed hand, a tall man came and stood on the top step, regarding the visitors through heavy-lidded eyes. He was, in contrast to the other Orgians, handsome, with a massive, leonine head and long hair as white as Elric's; although the hair on the head of this great, solid man was somewhat dirty, tangled, unbrushed. He was dressed in a heavy jerkin of quilted, embossed leather, a yellow kilt which reached to his ankles and he carried a wide-bladed dagger, naked in his belt. He was older than Elric, aged between forty and fifty and his powerful, if somewhat decadent, face was seamed and pock-marked.

He stared at them in silence and did not welcome them ; instead he signed to one of the battlement guards who caused the drawgate to be lowered. It came down with a crash, blocking off their way of escape.

" Kill the men and keep the woman," said the massive man in a low monotone. Elric had heard dead men speak in that manner.

As planned, Elric and Moonglum stood either side of Zarozinia and remained where they were, arms folded.

Puzzled, shambling Orgians came warily at them, their loose trousers dragging in the mud, their hands hidden by the long shapeless sleeves of their filthy garments. They swung their cleavers. Elric felt a faint shock as the blade thudded on to his arm, but that was all. Moonglum's experience was similar.

The Orgians fell back, amazement and confusion on their bestial faces.

The tall man's eyes widened. He put one ring-covered hand to his thick lips, chewing at a nail.

" Our swords have no effect upon them, King ! They do not cut and they do not bleed. What are these folk ?"

Elric laughed theatrically. " We are not common folk, little human, be assured. We are the messengers of the Gods and come to your King with a message from our great masters. Do not worry, we shall not harm you since we are in no danger of being harmed. Stand aside and make us welcome."

Elric could see that King Gutharan was puzzled and not absolutely taken in by his words. Elric cursed to himself. He had measured the Orgian's intelligence by those he had seen. This king, mad or not, was much more intelligent, was going to be harder to deceive. He led the way up the steps towards glowering Gutharan.

" Greetings, King Gutharan. The Gods have, at last, returned to Org and wish you to know this."

" Org has had no Gods to worship for an eternity," said Gutharan hollowly, turning back into the citadel. " Why should we accept them now ?"

" You are impertinent, King."

" And you are audacious. How do I know you come from the Gods ?" He walked ahead of them, leading them through the low-roofed halls.

"You saw that the swords of your subjects had no effect upon us."

"True. I'll take that incident as proof for the moment. I suppose there must be a banquet in your—honour—I shall order it. Be welcome, messengers." His words were ungracious but it was virtually impossible to detect anything from Gutheran's tone, since the man's voice stayed at the same pitch.

Elric pushed his heavy riding cloak back from his shoulders and said lightly: "We shall mention your kindness to our masters."

The Court was a place of gloomy halls and false laughter and although Elric put many questions to Gutheran, the king would not answer them, or did so by means of ambiguous phrases which meant nothing. They were not given chambers wherein they could refresh themselves but instead stood about for several hours in the main hall of the citadel and Gutheran, while he was with them and not giving orders for the banquet, sat slumped on his throne and chewed at his nails, ignoring them.

"Pleasant hospitality," whispered Moonglum.

"Elric—how long will the effects of the drug last?" Zarozinia had remained close to him. He put his arm around her shoulders. "I do not know. **Not much longer.** But it has served its purpose. I doubt if they will try to attack us a second time. However, beware of other attempts, subtler ones, upon our lives."

The main hall, which had a higher roof than the others and was completely surrounded by a gallery which ran around it well above the floor, fairly close to the roof, was chilly and unwarmed. No fires burned in the several hearths, which were open and let into the floor, and the walls dripped moisture and were undecorated; damp, solid stone, timeworn and gaunt. There were not even rushes upon the floor which was strewn with old bones and pieces of decaying food.

"Hardly house-proud, are they?" commented Moonglum looking around him with distaste and glancing at brooding Gutheran who was seemingly oblivious of their presence.

A servitor shambled into the hall and whispered a few words to the king. He nodded and arose, leaving the Great Hall.

Soon men came in, carrying benches and tables and began to place them about the hall.

The banquet was, at last, due to commence. And the air had menace in it.

The three visitors sat together on the right of the King who had donned a richly jewelled chain of kingship, whilst his son and several pale-faced female members of the Royal line sat on the left, unspeaking even among themselves.

Prince Hurd, a sullen-faced youth who seemed to bear a resentment against his father, picked at the unappetising food which was served them all.

He drank heavily of the wine which had little flavour but was strong, fiery stuff and this seemed to warm the company a little.

"And what do the Gods want of us poor Orgians?" Hurd said, staring hard at Zarozinia with more than friendly interest.

Elric answered: "They ask nothing of you but your recognition. In return they will, on occasions, help you."

"That is all?" Hurd laughed. "That is more than those from the Hill can offer, eh, father?"

Guthuran turned his great head slowly to regard his son.

"Yes," he murmured, and the word seemed to carry warning.

Moonglum said: "The Hill—what is that?"

He got no reply. Instead a high-pitched laugh came from the entrance to the Great Hall. A thin, gaunt man stood there staring ahead with a fixed gaze. His features, though emaciated, strongly resembled Guthuran's. He carried a stringed instrument and plucked at the gut so that it wailed and moaned with melancholy insistence.

Hurd said savagely: "Look, father, 'tis blind Veerkad, the minstrel, your brother. Shall he sing for us?"

"Sing?"

"Shall he sing his songs, father?"

Guthuran's mouth trembled and twisted and he said after a moment: "He may entertain our guests with an heroic ballad if he wishes, but . . ."

"But certain other songs he shall not sing . . ." Hurd grinned maliciously. He seemed to be tormenting his father deliberately in some way which Elric could not guess. Hurd shouted at the blind man: "Come Uncle Veerkad — sing!"

"There are strangers present," said Veerkad hollowly above the wail of his own music. "Strangers in Org?"

Hurd giggled and drank more wine. Guthuran scowled and continued to tremble, gnawing at his nails.

Elric called: "We'd appreciate a song, minstrel."

"Then you'll have the song of the Three Kings in Darkness, strangers, and hear the ghastly story of the Kings of Org."

"No!" shouted Guthuran, leaping from his place, but Veerkad was already singing:

"Three Kings in darkness lie,
Guthuran of Org, and I,
Under a bleak and sunless sky—
The third beneath the Hill.
When shall the third arise?
Only when another dies . . ."

"Stop!" Guthuran got up in an obviously insane rage and stumbled across the table, trembling in terror, his face blanched, striking at the blind man, his brother. Two blows and the minstrel fell, slumping to the floor and not moving. "Take him out! Do not let him enter again." The king shrieked and foam flecked his lips.

Hurd, sober for a moment, jumped across the table, scattering dishes and cups and took his father's arm.

"Be calm, father. I have a new plan for our entertainment."

"You! You seek my throne. 'Twas you who goaded Veerkad to sing his dreadful song. You know I cannot listen without . . ." He stared at the door. "One day the legend shall be realised and the Hill-King shall come. Then shall I, you and Org perish."

"Father," Hurd was smiling horribly, "let the female visitor dance for us a dance of the Gods."

"What?"

"Let the woman dance for us, father."

Elric heard him. By now the drug must have worn off. He could not afford to show his hand by offering his companions further doses. He got to his feet.

"What sacrilege do you speak, Prince?"

"We have given you entertainment. It is the custom in Org for our visitors to give us entertainment also."

The hall was electric with menace. Elric regretted his plan to trick the Orgians, now. But there was nothing he could

do. He had intended to exact tribute from them in the name of the Gods, but obviously these mad men feared more immediate and tangible dangers than any the Gods might represent.

He had made a mistake, put the lives of his friends in danger as well as his own. What should he do? Zarozinia murmured: "I have learned dances in Ilmiora where all ladies are taught the art. Let me dance for them. It might placate them and bedazzle them to make our work easier."

"Arioch knows our work is hard enough now. I was a fool to have conceived this plan. Very well, Zarozinia, dance for them, but with caution." He shouted at Hurd: "Our companion will dance for you, to show you the beauty that the Gods create. Then you must pay the tribute, for our masters grow impatient."

"The tribute?" Guthuran looked up. "You mentioned nothing of tribute."

"Your recognition of the Gods must take the form of precious stones and metals, King Guthuran. I thought you to understand that."

"You seem more like common thieves than uncommon messengers, my friends. We are poor in Org and have nothing to give away to charlatans."

"Beware of your words, King!" Elric's clear voice echoed warningly through the hall.

"We'll see the dance and then judge the truth of what you've told us."

Elric seated himself, grasped Zarozinia's hand beneath the table as she arose, giving her comfort.

She walked gracefully and confidently into the centre of the hall and there began to dance. Elric, who loved her, was amazed at her splendid grace and artistry. She danced the old, beautiful dances of Ilmiora, entrancing even the thick-skulled Orgians and, as she danced, a great golden Guest Cup was brought in.

Hurd leaned across his father and said to Elric: "The Guest Cup, Lord. It is our custom that our guests drink from it in friendship."

Elric nodded, annoyed at being disturbed in his watching of the wonderful dance, his eyes fixed on Zarozinia as she postured and glided. There was silence in the hall.

Hurd handed him the cup and absently he put it to his lips, seeing this Zarozinia danced on to the table and began

to weave along it to where Elric sat. As he took the first sip, Zarozinia cried out and, with her foot, knocked the cup from his hand. The wine splashed on to Guthuran and Hurd who half rose, startled. "It was drugged, Elric. They drugged it!"

Hurd lashed at her with his hand, striking her across the face. She fell from the table and lay moaning slightly on the filthy floor. "Bitch! Would the messengers of the Gods be harmed by a little drugged wine?"

Enraged, Elric pushed aside Guthuran and struck savagely at Hurd so that the young man's mouth gushed blood. But the drug was already having effect. Guthuran shouted something and Moonglum drew his sabre, glancing upwards. Elric was swaying, his senses were jumbled and the scene had an unreal quality. He saw servants grasp Zarozinia but could not see how Moonglum was faring. He felt sick and dizzy, could hardly control his limbs.

Summoning up his last remaining strength, Elric clubbed Hurd down with one tremendous blow. Then he collapsed into unconsciousness.

four

There was the cold clutch of chains about his wrists and a thin drizzle was falling directly on to his face which stung where Hurd's nails had ripped it.

He looked about him. He was chained between two stone menhirs upon an obvious burial barrow of gigantic size. It was night and a pale moon hovered in the heavens above him. He looked down at the group of men below. Hurd and Guthuran were among them. They grinned at him mockingly.

"Farewell, messenger. You will serve us a good purpose and placate the Ones from the Hill!" Hurd called as he and the others scurried back towards the citadel which lay, silhouetted, a short distance away.

Where was he? What had happened to Zarozinia—and Moonglum? Why had he been chained thus upon—realisation and remembrance came—*the Hill!*

He shuddered, helpless in the strong chains which held him. Desperately he began to tug at them, but they would not yield. He searched his brain for a plan, but he was confused

by torment and worry for his friends' safety. He heard a dreadful scuttling sound from below and saw a ghastly white shape dart into the gloom. Wildly he struggled in the rattling iron which held him.

In the Great Hall of the citadel, a riotous celebration was now reaching the state of an ecstatic orgy. Gutheran and Hurd were totally drunk, laughing insanely at their victory.

Outside the Hall, Veerkad listened and hated. Particularly he hated his brother, the man who had deposed and blinded him to prevent his study of sorcery by means of which he had planned to raise the King from Beneath the Hill.

"The time has come, at last," he whispered to himself and stopped a passing servant.

"Tell me—where is the girl kept?"

"In Gutheran's chamber, master."

Veerkad released the man and began to grope his way through the gloomy corridors up twisting steps, until he reached the room he sought. Here he produced a key, one of many he'd had made without Gutheran's knowing, and unlocked the door.

Zarozinia saw the blind man enter and could do nothing. She was gagged and bound with her own dress and still dazed from the blow Hurd had given her. They had told her of Elric's fate, but Moonglum had so far escaped them, guards hunted him even now in the stinking corridors of Org.

"I've come to take you to your companion, lady," smiled blind Veerkad, grasping her roughly with strength that his insanity had given him, picked her up and fumbled his way towards the door. He knew the passages of Org perfectly, for he had been born and grown up among them.

But two men were in the corridor outside Gutheran's chambers. One of them was Hurd, Prince of Org, who resented his father's appropriation of the girl and desired her for himself. He saw Veerkad bearing the girl away and stood silent while his uncle passed.

The other man was Moonglum, who observed what was happening from the shadows where he had hidden from the searching guards. As Hurd followed Veerkad, on cautious feet, Moonglum followed him.

Veerkad went out of the citadel by a small side door and carried his living burden towards the looming Burial Hill.

All about the foot of the monstrous barrow swarmed the leprous-white ghouls who sensed the presence of Elric, the Orgian's sacrifice to them.

Now Elric understood.

These were the things the Orgians feared more than the Gods. These were the living-dead ancestors of those who now revelled in the Great Hall. Perhaps these were actually the Doomed Folk. Was that their doom? Never to rest? Never to die? Just to degenerate into mindless ghouls? Elric shuddered.

Now desperation brought back his memory.

He cried to Arioch, the Demon God of Melnibone, and his voice was an agonised wail to the brooding sky and the pulsing earth.

"Arioch! Destroy the stones. Save your servant! Arioch—master—aid me!"

It was not enough. The ghouls gathered together and began to scuttle, gibbering up the barrow towards the helpless albino.

"Arioch! These are the things that would forsake your memory! Aid me to destroy them!"

The earth trembled and the sky became overcast, hiding the moon but not the white-faced, bloodless ghouls who were now almost upon him.

And then a ball of fire formed in the sky above him and the very sky seemed to shake and sway around it. Then, with a roaring crash two bolts of lightning slashed down, pulverising the stones and releasing Elric.

He got to his feet, knowing that Arioch would demand his price, as the first ghouls reached him.

He did not retreat, but in his rage and desperation leapt among them, smashing and flailing with the lengths of chain. The ghouls fell back and fled, gibbering in fear and anger, down the hill and into the barrow.

Elric could now see that there was a gaping entrance to the barrow below him; black against the blackness. Breathing heavily, he found that his belt pouch had been left him. From it he took a length of slim, gold wire and began frantically to pick at the locks of the manacles.

Veerkad chuckled to himself and Zarozinia hearing him was almost mad with terror. He kept drooling the words into her ear : " When shall the third arise ? Only when another dies. When that other's blood flows red—we'll hear the footfalls of the dead. You and I, we shall resurrect him and such vengeance will he wreck upon my cursed brother. Your blood, my dear, it will be that released him." He felt that the ghouls were gone and judged them placated by their feast. " Your lover has been useful to me," he laughed as he began to enter the barrow. The smell of death almost overpowered the girl as the blind madman bore her downwards into the heart of the Hill.

Hurd, sobered after his walk in the colder air, was horrified when he saw where Veerkad was going ; the barrow, the Hill of the King, was the most feared spot in the land of Org. Hurd paused before the black entrance and turned to run. Then, suddenly, he saw the form of Elric, looming huge and bloody, descending the barrow slope, cutting off his escape.

With a wild yell he fled into the Hill passage.

Elric had not previously noticed the Prince, but the yell startled him and he tried to see who had given it but was too late. He began to run down the steep incline towards the entrance of the barrow. Another figure came scampering out of the darkness.

" Elric ! Thank the stars and all the Gods of Earth ! You live !"

" Thank Arioch, Moonglum. Where's Zarozinia ?"

" In there—the mad minstrel took her with him and Hurd followed. They are all insane, these kings and princes, I see no sense to their actions."

" I have an idea that the minstrel means Zarozinia no good. Quickly, we must follow."

" By the stars, the stench of death ! I have breathed nothing like it—not even at the great battle of the Eshmir Valley where the armies of Elwher met those of Tararn Gashtek, Lord of the Mounted Hordes, and half-a-million corpses strewed the valley from end to end."

" If you've no stomach . . ."

" I wish I had none. It would not be so bad. Come . . ."

They rushed into the passage, led by the far away sounds of Veerkad's maniacal laughter and the somewhat nearer movements of a fear-maddened Hurd who was now trapped between two enemies and yet more afraid of a third.

Hurd blundered along in the blackness, sobbing to himself in his terror.

In the weirdly phosphorescent Central Tomb, surrounded by the mummified corpses of his ancestors, Veerkad chanted the resurrection ritual before the great coffin of the Hill-King—a giant thing, half as tall again as Veerkad who was tall enough. Veerkad was forgetful for his own safety and thinking only of vengeance upon his brother Gutheran. He held a long dagger over Zarozinia who lay huddled and terrified upon the ground near the coffin.

The spilling of Zarozinia's blood would be the culmination of the ritual and then—

Then Hell would, quite literally, be let loose. Or so Veerkad planned. He finished his chanting and raised the knife just as Hurd came screeching into the Central Tomb with his own sword drawn. Veerkad swung round, his blind face working in thwarted rage.

Savagely, without stopping for a moment, Hurd ran his sword into Veerkad's body, plunging the blade in up to the hilt so that its bloody point appeared sticking from his back. But the other, in his groaning death spasms, locked his hands about the Prince's throat. Locked them immovably.

Somehow, the two men retained a semblance of life and, struggling with each other in a macabre death-dance, swayed about the glowing chamber. The coffin of the Hill-King began to tremble and shake slightly, the movement hardly perceptible.

So Elric and Moonglum found Veerkad and Hurd. Seeing that both were near dead, Elric raced across the Central Tomb to where Zarozinia lay, unconscious, mercifully, from her ordeal. Elric picked her up and made to return.

He glanced at the throbbing coffin.

"Quickly, Moonglum. That blind fool has invoked the dead, I can tell. Hurry, my friend, before the hosts of Hell are upon us."

Moonglum gasped and followed Elric as he ran back towards the cleaner air of night.

"Where to now, Elric?"

"We'll have to risk going back to the citadel. Our horses are there and our goods. We need the horses to take us quickly away, for I fear there's going to be a terrible blood-letting soon if my instinct is right."

"There should not be too much opposition, Elric. They were all drunk when I left. That was how I managed to evade them so easily. By now, if they continued drinking as heavily as when last I saw them, they'll be unable to move at all."

"Then let's make haste."

They left the Hill behind them and began to run towards the citadel.

five

Moonglum had spoken truth. Everyone was lying about the Great Hall in drunken sleep. Open fires had been lit in the hearths and they blazed, sending shadows skipping around the Hall. Elric said softly :

"Moonglum, go with Zarozinia to the stables and prepare our horses. I will settle our debt with Gutharan first." He pointed. "See, they have heaped their booty upon the table, gloating in their apparent victory."

Stormbringer lay upon a pile of burst sacks and saddle-bags which contained the loot stolen from Zarozinia's uncle and cousins and from Elric and Moonglum.

Zarozinia, now conscious but confused, left with Moonglum to locate the stables and Elric picked his way towards the table, across the sprawled shapes of drunken Orgians, around the blazing fires and caught up, thankfully, his hell-forged runeblade.

Then he leaped over the table and was about to grasp Gutharan, who still has his fabulously gemmed chain of kingship around his neck, when the great doors of the Hall crashed open and a howling blast of icy air sent the torches dancing and leaping. Elric turned, Gutharan forgotten, and his eyes widened.

Framed in the doorway stood the King from Beneath the Hill.

The long-dead monarch had been raised by Veerkad whose own blood had completed the work of resurrection. He stood in rotting robes, his fleshless bones covered by tight, tattered skin. His heart did not beat, for he had none ; he drew no breath, for his lungs had been eaten by the creatures which feasted on such things. But, horribly, he lived . . .

The King from the Hill. He had been the last great ruler of the Doomed Folk who had, in their fury, destroyed half

the Earth and created the Forest of Troos. Behind the dead King crowded the ghastly hosts who had been buried with him in a legendary past.

The massacre began !

What secret vengeance was being reaped, Elric could only guess at—but whatever the reason, the danger was still very real.

Elric pulled out *Stormbringer* as the awakened horde vented their anger upon the living. The Hall became filled with the shrieking, horrified screams of the unfortunate Orgians. Elric remained, half-paralysed in his horror, beside the throne. Aroused, Guthuran woke up and saw the King from the Hill and his host. He screamed, almost thankfully :

“ At last I can rest ! ”

And fell dying in a seizure, robbing Elric of his vengeance.

Veerkad's grim song echoed in Elric's memory. The Three Kings in Darkness—Guthuran, Veerkad and the King from Beneath the Hill. Now only the last lived—and he had been dead for millenia.

The King's cold, dead eyes roved the Hall and saw Guthuran sprawled upon his throne, the ancient chain of office still about his throat. Elric wrenched it off the body and backed away as the King from Beneath the Hill advanced. And then his back was against a pillar and there were feasting ghouls everywhere else.

The dead King came nearer and then, with a whistling moan which came from the depths of his decaying body, launched himself at Elric who found himself fighting desperately against the Hill-King's clawing, abnormal strength, cutting at flesh that neither bled nor suffered pain. Even the sorcerous rune-blade could do nothing against this horror that had no soul to take and no blood to let.

Frantically, Elric slashed and hacked at the Hill-King but ragged nails raked his flesh and teeth snapped at his throat. And above everything came the almost overpowering stench of death as the ghouls, packing the Great Hall with their horrible shapes, feasted on the living and the dead.

Then Elric heard Moonglum's voice calling and saw him upon the gallery which ran around the Hall. He held a great oil jar.

“ Lure him close to the central fire, Elric. There may be a way to vanquish him. Quickly man, or you're finished ! ”

In a frantic burst of energy, the Melnibonean forced the giant king towards the flames. Around them, the ghouls fed off the remains of their victims, some of whom still lived, their screams calling hopelessly over the sound of carnage.

The Hill-King now stood, unfeeling, with his back to the leaping central fire. He still slashed at Elric. Moonglum hurled the jar.

It shattered upon the stone hearth, spraying the King with blazing oil. He staggered, and Elric struck with his full power, the man and the blade combining to push the Hill-King backwards. Down went the King into the flames and the flames began to devour him.

A dreadful, lost howling came from the burning giant as he perished.

Flames licked everywhere throughout the Great Hall and soon the place was like Hell itself, an inferno of licking fire through which the ghouls ran about, still feasting, unaware of their destruction. The way to the door was blocked.

Elric stared around him and saw no way of escape—save one.

Sheathing *Stormbringer*, he ran a few paces and leaped upwards, just grasping the rail of the gallery as flames engulfed the spot where he had been standing.

Moonglum reached down and helped him to clamber across the rail.

"I'm disappointed, Elric," he grinned, "you forgot to bring the treasure."

Elric showed him what he grasped in his left hand—the jewel-encrusted chain of kingship.

"This bauble is some reward for our hardships," he smiled, holding up the glittering chain. "I stole nothing, by Arioeh! There are no kings left in Org to wear it! Come let's join Zarozinia and get our horses."

They ran from the gallery as masonry began to crash downwards into the Great Hall.

They rode fast away from the halls of Org and looking back saw great fissures appear in the walls and heard the roar of destruction as the flames consumed everything that had been Org. They destroyed the seat of the monarchy, the remains of the Three Kings in Darkness, the present and the past. Nothing would be left of Org save an empty burial mound and two corpses, locked together, lying where their

ancestors had lain for centuries in the Central Tomb. They destroyed the last link with the previous Time Cycle and cleansed the Earth of an ancient evil. Only the dreadful Forest of Troos remained to mark the coming and the passing of the legendary Doomed Folk.

And the Forest of Troos was a warning.

Wearied and yet relieved, the three saw the outlines of Troos in the distance, behind the blazing funeral pyre.

And yet, in his happiness, Elric had a fresh problem on his mind now that danger was past.

"Why do you frown now, love?" asked Zarozinia.

"Because I think you spoke the truth. Remember you said I placed too much reliance on my runeblade here?"

"Yes—and I said I would not dispute with you."

"Agreed. But I have a feeling that you were partially right. On the burial mound and in it I did not have *Storm-bringer* with me—and yet I fought and won, because I feared for your safety." His voice was quiet. "Perhaps, in time, I can keep my strength by means of certain herbs I found in Troos and dispense with the blade forever?"

Moonglum shouted with laughter hearing these words.

"Elric—I never thought I'd witness this. You daring to think of dispensing with that foul weapon of yours. I don't know if you ever shall, but the thought is comforting."

"It is, my friend, it is." He leaned in his saddle and grasped Zarozinia's shoulders, pulling her dangerously towards him as they galloped without slackening speed. And as they rode he kissed her, heedless of their pace.

"A new beginning!" he shouted above the wind. "A new beginning, my love!"

And then they all rode laughing towards Karlaak by the Weeping Waste, to present themselves, to enrich themselves, and to attend the strangest wedding the Northern Lands had ever witnessed. For it would be more than a marriage between the awful evil-bringer of legends and a senator's youthful daughter—it would be a marriage between the dark wisdom of the Ancient World and the bright hope of the New.

And who could tell what such a combination would bring about?

The Earth would soon know, for Elric of Melnibone was the maker of legends and there were legends yet to make!

—Michael Moorcock

There wasn't anything special about the old top hat, except that it was old—until the purchaser put it on his head. Then a strange transformation took place.

HAT TRICK

BY COLIN DENBIGH

Why should destiny be wrapped up in a hat of all things? Everyone's destiny, that is, not just my own. Why a top hat? Maybe the shape was convenient to disguise the apparatus, or perhaps the apparatus had suggested the shape. Either way it made no difference. Its shape, like its origins, were beyond any of my guesses.

It had me from the first moment it slipped over my head. I was switched off the rails of my past life as though someone had thrown the points in front of a main line express. There was no turning back.

The old man had shown me hundreds of garments of every style and period. His name was a byword among theatrical people. I wanted a few items to supplement the costume for what seemed likely to be a long run.

"And a hat," I said. "About 1890, a topper."

"Naturally, Mr. Bland," he wheezed. "A topper, of course. I have quite a range, you will find. Every size."

I looked over the incredible collection of headwear in the second room. The old madman weaved his way through them clucking and patting as though he was a visiting politician at an orphanage. He thrived in the dust and muskiness.

"This should do it," he said, after I had tried about twenty, each personally recommended. "Just made for the part. 1890 to a tee, look at the styling." He blew off the dust and fitted it on my head.

I was not sure what happened for the next few minutes. I was whirling about somewhere over London's Theatreland. A sense of nausea persisted for some moments before I got my bearings, then I began to recognise the streets and landmarks.

I appeared to be enclosed in a filmy bubble of room-size dimensions. It had a greenish tint in places but otherwise was quite transparent.

Directly below me I recognised the shops where my wife and I make our purchases, near Drury Lane. There were streams of cars and people bustling about.

It was then I realised that I could make out their faces in sharp detail. The distance made no difference. I saw a car draw to the curb and the door open. It was my own car. My wife, Lorna, got out and went in to a chemists to get me some colour film. A little surprise it was to be. She had won a cash prize on one of her many magazine competitions. Not that I had any way of knowing all that, I just knew.

In the shop she had some trouble getting the right brand. The assistant dithered about at the wrong end of the counter until my impatience grabbed the girl's arm and led her down the shelf to clap her hand on the package.

I heard her confused explanation to my wife. Instinct, she thought it was. My wife was no less puzzled herself, she made a mental note to tell me later. She walked back to the car and got in. The familiar lines moved off along the road. Then they wobbled, the outline shimmering as though with heat distortion. When the shape was firm once more it was different. It was seconds before I saw what it was. A shoe. A big black shoe.

I followed the shoe up past the trouser leg, over a dusty jacket to the old man's familiar face. He looked worried.

"Feeling better now, sir," he enquired. "You seem to have had a nasty turn." He had the hat in his hand and was absently brushing it with a shiny sleeve.

"Yes, thanks," I said. "What happened?"

"I expect it was the heat, sir, I've got the stove on, you see. I loosened your collar I'm afraid, I thought it necessary, you were that pale. It was a job to get you into the chair, stiff as a post you were, Mr. Bland."

I had not realised I was sitting. He must have removed the hat to put the pillow behind my head.

"It has all been most considerate of you," I said. "Please accept my sincere thanks. But I feel much better now, I had better be going." I stood up. "I will take the hat with the other things, by the way. If you would wrap them?"

I said nothing back at the theatre. I had a talented stand-in breathing down my neck for his big chance. With my own performances a lot flatter than I cared to admit I could not risk the inevitable comparison that would follow if he had a break like that. He would wipe me off the map and feel pleased to do it.

I found Aubrey Jones, the producer, and excused myself from the planned meeting on the morrow, a Sunday.

"Some family complication," I lied. "I have to attend to it right away. Sorry, Aubrey, but you could let me know on Monday about any recommendations."

"I'm so sorry, Owen," he smiled. "A great pity too, because Laurie has offered one or two very keen suggestions himself. Thought you would want to be there."

Laurence Rafferty was my stand-in. Any suggestions he made would not be for my benefit. It was a risk but I had to have time to think. I felt a stab of regret that caution robbed me of the chance to make some witticism about having a hat on my mind. Almost too good to miss.

"Sorry, again, this won't wait," I explained. He gave in gracefully.

I dragged myself through the performance. The worst ever, I thought. Only at the end was I able to concentrate and put some gusto into it.

Curiously enough, they loved it. I'd never seen such enthusiasm. Aubrey was delighted.

"You were splendid, my dear boy," he purred. "A revelation. The contrasts were inspired, my dear fellow, perfectly wonderful, and so vital." He wagged a sly finger at me. "Aha! No wonder the meeting tomorrow didn't worry you with this up your sleeve."

It was easier not to argue and much quicker. I escaped him and the cluster of stage-struck autograph hunters outside and dived, with the hat box under one arm, into my car. Lorna was waiting at the wheel.

"I heard all about it, darling," she said, as we drove homewards. "You were a sensation I hear. I wish I had seen you tonight."

We chatted and jested, still in love after five years of theatre marriage. We made a team.

The hat box passed unnoticed and I smuggled it up to the loft in our smart little house in a secluded mews. The loft was my sole refuge and work space when the urge to relax gripped me. The folding ladder was party proof. I could take my drink up there and cut myself off from the noisy cocktail swilling guests.

At breakfast Lorna held up a little parcel.

"A present for you, darling. Guess right first time and I'll make an exception to Sunday being a day of rest!"

I grinned. "Colour film?" I hazarded.

The smile froze on her face. "How on earth . . ." she faltered.

"You don't mean I'm right?" I said.

"Yes, bullseye." She brightened up again. "The prize will come later on, Valerie is coming round for a chat."

She handed me the package and then went on to tell all about the silly girl in the shop. I had a job to look surprised.

"What a nitwit," I said. "It's not as though Superkrome is an unusual make."

I stopped there. Lorna was looking strange again. I realised she had not mentioned the brand.

"I suppose you did get Super?" I covered up. "It's the brand I'm always talking about."

"Yes, I did, darling. But it seemed a bit uncanny hearing you guess it like that."

"Aha! Watch out for your guilty secrets," I joked. That did not go down well either.

Back in the loft I toyed with the hat, afraid to put it on in case there was no way out of the trance. I had to be careful with no convenient helper around. I rigged up a crude gadget of strings and weights. A large tin can filled with sand worked like an hour glass through a hole in its bottom. Falling in to a dish on my wife's old flour scales it swung down against a fixed weight and tripped the strings. In tests with another hat it worked well. As the measure of sand poured out the weights fell, and up whisked the hat on its cord.

It was late before I could get away for a real tryout. Lorna was set for a T.V. session. I was not missed.

Reclining in an old cane chair, the safety gadgets adjusted, I braced myself and took the plunge. Chair, loft and ceiling

light spun in an accelerating, widening cylinder of fading stripes and dissolved into the night.

London crystallised from the luminous haze into an animated street map. My whole being throbbed and tingled with awareness. I found I could drift at will wherever the impulse directed, over the bright and the shadowed streets, peering into the hidden lives lurking in their holes and corners. Every idea was mine to share. The guile and greed of sensual mercenaries, the spiteful boredom of caste-haunted socialities in fashionable apartments, the prejudice and hate of mean streets; the deformed growth of vice and parasitism in sly corners; all stripped naked their unsuspecting secret identities, exposed and raw for my probing mind.

A sense of godlike power began to seep, then flood, into me. I hung, dark, tensed and spiderlike, clasping the nerve threads of a vast web, keyed for the slightest trembling thought.

Near the docks I was drawn to a shadowed court. A miserable rough-paved square lit by one rusted lamp post. Against it leaned an idle muscular shape, on the railings around the square were others. Dark, brooding and evil men radiating an incomplete jumble of greed and resentment.

Suddenly a new impulse leapt into their minds. A complex of arrogance and lust. It centred on a couple walking quickly across the court in a short cut to the underground station.

The man and the girl had different emotions. Love and companionship, the show they had seen, a promised embrace. And then, sick sweating fear as the gang appeared from the darkness, insolent and swaggering.

The leader emerged from the yellow lamp-light and barred their way. He called an obscene proposal to the girl which brought a chorus of hoots and laughter from his followers. The girl's escort sized up the situation in a moment of rage and despair. Noted the length of chain drawn from the gang leader's pocket and the brandished knives and razors behind him.

"Go on home, sonny," growled the thug. "We don't want you. We just want a little talk with the lady friend." He swung the sharpened chain in a slow circle.

I felt the rage and impotence in the young man, and then my own anger boiled up until a scalding hatred for the back alley scum welled out and poured down like a flood.

The scene was shattered in an instant by the most frightful screams. The hoodlums fell writhing on the black scarred paving, twisted in convulsions of agony. I felt my loathing burning into them, searing their lungs and intestines.

Soon they were stilled. The square was silent. The couple stood numbed with shock. A woman on the far side phoned the police. I watched until the gloom was scythed apart by the police headlamps, stripping the darkness from the court, sending long shadows swinging from the huddled bodies and the stunned couple.

Then the lights winked out. I struggled up from a well of blackness, up into the light and comfort of the old cane chair. The top hat swung pendulum-wise from the string. Trembling I lit a cigarette. How much of what I had seen had happened. I would have to wait. I could not risk any more time that night.

Lorna could not understand my detachment when I went down to her. She fell asleep unhappily. My excuses did not reassure her.

On the Monday morning it was hard not to snatch the paper from her hand. Harder not to upset the cup of tea she had brought when I saw the headlines screaming across the front page :

MYSTERY HORROR KILLS NINE THREATENED GIRL SEES RAZOR THUGS DIE

I read on. The police had taken statements from the man and girl. There had been another witness, the woman who had phoned. Cause of death was not yet known. The bodies had been terribly contorted but showed no external injuries. A police spokesman said that nothing could be added until postmortem examinations had been made.

I realised then that I could never share the secret unless I wanted to hang for it. I was a mass murderer. An executioner. How could I have explained it to Lorna? Would she have looked at me in the same way again? If she ever knew she could betray me without knowing it. A careless word would slip out sooner or later.

"What's the matter, darling?" she asked, her hand affectionately on my shoulder. What could I answer. "Overwork, I expect," I said. "Things have been a strain lately."

"But you're shaking, darling. I've never seen you like this before." She was frowning with concern. "Hadden't we better call in Doctor Evans? He could have a look at you."

I did not argue. Already I realised the futility of trying to carry on as though nothing had happened.

"I shouldn't really lay up now," I said. "Not with the play as it is. Rafferty will crow his head off."

"Let him ! I'm worried about you, not Rafferty. Anyway, if you go on tonight like this you might do more harm than good. There will be some crowing if you muff your lines. After Saturday night's performance you can afford to let him have a go. It couldn't be better timed. If he does better, I for one will be very surprised."

I did not need much persuading. I let Doc Evans, an old friend, have a look at me. Calling as he did just after I had re-read the newspaper account he found me pale and shaking. He wagged his head and advised a rest. I jumped at it.

With everything settled officially, Aubrey, the producer notified, everyone expressing regrets, I was set for some intensive work on the new powers, and if possible, the chance to learn something of how they worked.

The write-up of my Saturday performance had been enthusiastic. Short of being canonized I was at the top. I could relax for a time and let the theatre wait. Apart from that I was less interested in what happened to the theatre than I had ever been. I had other worries.

In a few weeks I exploited every power that hat controlled. Its range was unlimited. I tired of London and drifted over Europe. Then Asia, America, there was not a spot on the globe I could not reach. I spent hours hypnotised by the strangeness of remote regions and their customs. Languages were no bar since the thoughts were a universal standard. It took time interpreting the thoughts of more primitive peoples. Their minds were unexpectedly complicated, deep in magic and mystic ritual. I discovered that I could communicate with some of the elders in these hidden tribes. It was my most unsettling and rewarding moment, the first time it happened. In a moment I was closer to that wizened, mud-caked creature than I had ever been to Lorna. I felt defenceless and revealed, but I need not have worried. My fears of discovery were groundless. The wise elders showed neither surprise nor alarm. It was not the first time for them. Then I knew they had no clue to my identity, regarding me as just one more of their tribal spirits. It was the first real clue to the psychic nature of these phenomena.

I learned also to move objects. To manipulate them with growing skill. Had I known how I could have repaired watches anywhere between Tokyo and Manchester.

I learned to kill more efficiently. Instantly, without tell-tale cries or struggle. And the sense of overwhelming power grew each day. The world was in my hands. My world.

I knew that I would never return to the theatre. But I had to devise a cover to explain myself. It was the most difficult problem so far. To do nothing for long, I realised, would attract too much attention.

The solution was found in painting. I converted the loft to a studio. Had a large skylight put in the roof. All the home comforts. It was hard to convince Lorna that I had not gone mad. The lies ! Piled up until I sweated and groaned under them in my sleep. She grew cooler towards me each day. We rowed angrily over things that would have caused laughter not long before. I couldn't help it, I had to go on.

The painting I did was abstract. I saw it as the obvious choice for hiding a charlatan like myself. Perhaps it might not fool the people who knew but it would fool our friends. Besides, it was the only way I could paint in five minutes something I could claim took five hours.

I worked feverishly at the canvases, getting a savage joy from mangling the paint on their clean surfaces. I would blend in colours and designs I had seen in Amazon Indian villages, or ideas borrowed from unsuspecting painters in poor Montparnasse studios.

When later I arranged an exhibition in the West End the critics were mildly impressed. It was more of a success than I had dared hope. The cover was complete.

Money was the second problem. I was obliged to steal it. From night club owners, bookies, anyone likely to keep large sums in cash, I took what I needed. I could make the bundles of notes drift out of a room and through an open window without a sound. Over the rooftops it would float and in through my open skylight. If no window was conveniently open a chair could be made to smash one. The police were never busier.

As my position was more settled, I had announced my retirement from the theatre to an astounded press conference and a stunned Lorna. I started my purge.

In one night I killed over seventy social parasites who thrived on vice in London alone. I lost count towards the end.

The country was in pandemonium the next few weeks. The papers had no type big enough to express their horror. Police inspectors rushed in and out of the rooms in Scotland Yard going grey-haired by the hour. I watched the whole proceedings with considerable interest. Some of the theories put forward were quite amusing, even fantastic.

To make sure that too much attention was not aroused in our locality I had a purge in a few other places. I wiped out two hundred and eighteen undesirables of one sort or another in three cities in the United States. The next night saw another hundred die in Sydney and fifty in Tokyo. I had previously noted many of the haunts and hideouts on my reconnaissance trips and it took little time to sort them out. I killed them in full view of everyone. It was quicker than waiting for the victims to be alone, and psychologically devastating.

As soon as I discovered the power to make fire I scorched them out as well. A hideout could be purged and razed to the ground. It was no use sending for the fire brigade. I just kept making it hotter until they gave in. I tried not to hurt the firemen or smash the engines but some were unlucky.

National days of prayer became weekly events. Everywhere people were wailing and relenting. Some confessed to horrible sins. Rather than gamble on their powers of repentance I destroyed them as well.

About that time Lorna left me. She said I was not the man she married any more, which was true enough I suppose. It made her mad when I tried to help her pack. I was only trying to be friendly.

With only myself to worry about I moved out of London to Cornwall. I bought a cottage far from the towns and did my shopping once a week. Occasionally I took a little holiday for some relaxation and feminine companionship. I missed Lorna at those times.

From the purges, which I kept up the world over, I went on to politics. I studied the goings on at UNO with great interest. I had an idea that I was just what the world needed, one all-powerful directing mind with access to every secret stronghold of intrigue and political ambition. As my grasp

of international affairs widened I let my influence be felt. Obstructions to the growth of my ideas were removed with spectacular force. I began to issue written instructions to the delegates secretly typed in the UNO building and floated down from the vaulted ceiling before the astounded assembly.

One thing kept nagging at the back of my mind ever since I found the hat. I had no idea how it worked. I was afraid to damage it by any drastic method of examination. I worked at a patch inside with a razor blade and uncovered a fine net work of wires, gossamer thin. It was in Cornwall that an inspiration hit me. The ideal would have been X-ray plates. I doubted whether I could ever get the use of such stuff, let alone the know-how to make the most of it. Whatever I did had to be a solo job. I settled for ordinary photography.

It took a while to learn enough to make the idea practical. I spent a few weeks attending every photographic course, class and demonstration I could locate. Not in the flesh of course. I filled note books as I went along. I bought chemicals, heaters, thermometers, lamps, I had a room full of stuff. I didn't bother about a camera, I had no use for it.

The procedure was quite simple. In a dark room, eerie under the red safety light, I lined the hat with sensitised paper, cut to shape for the top and curled around the inside. Placed on a stand it was exposed to a battery of powerful lamps. For the brim it needed much longer, being so thick, but after several attempts I had what I needed. Developing brought out an amazing network of fine hair lines and minute coils in seven separate systems. In the brim were more fine wires and eleven thicker rods the size of matchsticks. A piece of pure luck showed me what they were and the use of a pin when doing a little careful probing. I picked up the hat and lost the pin. Where was it? Stuck to the brim. Magnets. Simple tiny bar magnets.

It took a week to find a small enough magnet for my next step, and three hours of rolling it up and down by the hat to establish the arrangement of their polarities. What a mug, I thought, I could have done it in five minutes with a small compass. Still, I had plenty of time.

Being the potential boss of the world is a lonely existence. I used to drive over to St. Ives and hob-nob with the arty types there. My painting was still going over, and it opened the door to many places. It was there I met Hanna.

She was untidy, none too clean, you might have said if you were fussy, and given to sulks and bouts of temper. Also she had a crazy collection of friends, mostly layabouts and hangers on of the art world fringes. A variety of scroungers and imposters, some passing themselves as painters, some sculptors. They all worked in abstract idioms, and even I, charlatan though I was, felt sick in the stomach to listen to them drivelling. They cost me money too on drinks and meals, not to mention the cigarettes.

It sounds mad, I suppose. What was I thinking about to take it all for Hanna.

It was worth it. She had what every girl dreams about and every man looks for all his life. A special brand of sex appeal that made you forget everything else that existed. When she was not throwing things or stealing your money, that is. But she made the hottest French film star look like a nun in a deep freeze.

She moved in with me after a while and I learned more about this and that in a day than I ever knew before. But what a distraction ! As the first novelty wore off I got to hate her at times, so I would beat her a bit. She was nicer than ever. I beat her harder—she came back hotter still. Looking at it objectively I would say she was slightly insane. I should have killed her when I had the chance. I will yet if I live long enough.

The UNO scheme was working well when Hanna started inviting her deadbeat friends over. They made it difficult to concentrate. The worst of them was a tall lout with dark sensuous eyes. I was jealous at the start, but he never looked at Hanna. He dipped into my pockets instead when the chance offered. He was the ringleader though not the brains of the band, but he was trouble enough. I waited for him to spend a day out somewhere and killed him off. I levitated the body and dumped it some miles along the coast off shore.

Things were easier for a bit, but Hanna was impossible for days. I knocked her about but it failed to improve her. I asked her why she was howling about that good-for-nothing washed up at Newquay. She told me it was her brother.

Unfortunately the police stated that death was caused by 'Unseen Power.' That was my official title, by the way. There were other more flattering terms applied by various odd religious sects.

It almost ruined my satisfaction at the success of writing my 'World Instructions' on the wall of the UNO building, before the eyes of the awed delegates. It was a masterly touch. A new Ten Commandments. Only there were twenty-five.

They worked, too. Hanna spoiled the full flavour of my triumph, but it worked. I had to follow up, of course, with some impressive rough stuff. Annihilating a mere half million stubborn fools was all that was necessary. Hanna went down to St. Ives as I worked and I missed my last chance of liquidating her, along with the others.

The next day I got back from the weekly shopping trip and found the wreck of one of Hanna's parties. I missed them by a few minutes as cigarettes were still scorching the edges of the furniture. They had stolen all my cigarettes, all the drink, some money and a lot of my clothes. I wasted ten minutes steadying my anger before I looked upstairs. Yes, the hat was gone.

So here I am in this back room in Glasgow ruining my eyesight trying to make a replica from my photograms, the room littered with tangled failures of fine copper wire and magnets. The big store of money might last out—I hope so—until I succeed, or somebody recognises me under the beard and pinpoints the target. Not that the money will be of use much longer. It doesn't seem to mean so much since the police force got wiped out. A gun is handier. And from what the radio said, before it went dead after announcing the Cabinet massacre, we are in for a generally rough time.

Particularly me, if Hanna and her friends can arrange it.

—Colin Denbigh

 * ***'Gone Away—No known address'*** *

Subscribers are reminded to keep us informed of any change of address to ensure the safe delivery of their copies as far too many issues are returned by the Post Office marked as above. Overseas subscribers are particularly requested to let us know in good time.

Introducing a tale from the Midnight Club—in which the reason why vampires do not propagate is readily explained and why they are a dying (or dead) species

BEGINNER'S LUCK

BY STEVE HALL

The members of the Midnight Club were a heterogeneous group : there were male and female, eighteen and six respectively ; some were young, some not so young, while others were almost patriarchal ; they were tall, medium, short, fat, thin, dark, fair, and auburn ; but in one respect they were homogeneous—all were writers of fantasy. As was usual at their quarterly meeting, they had dined well. Appetites had been satisfied, ruffled tempers soothed, plot difficulties and deadlines were for the moment forgotten—the stage and the mood had been set for the main event of the evening.

Waiters passed around with liqueurs and then quietly withdrew. Flints and matches scraped against their respective abrasives as the smokers lit up. The candle flames ate their way a little lower down the curling wicks, and the hum of conversation diminished as the hands of time rotated nearer to twelve.

Punctually, as the first stroke chimed, the President of the Club rose and stood silently until the echoes of the last one had vibrated away its energy. Having observed the traditions, he stuck both hands in his dinner jacket pockets, fingers inside, thumbs overhanging.

"Fellow fantasy writers, once again it is my pleasant duty to stand before you and introduce a guest speaker. He is a doctor, and he proposes to talk to us about the Vampire. This much, both you and I know, but for the rest of the story, let me without further delay introduce Philip Kemp."

A murmur of welcome rippled cordially around the table, and all eyes turned towards their guest.

Kemp was rather above medium height, with dark hair and eyes. After rising and bowing slightly, he gazed quizzically around for a few seconds before speaking, and then, having mentally chosen his opening words, said: "I want first to pose some questions to you tonight, questions which seem impossible to answer. They concern the extent to which you believe in your own writing and just how credible, or gullible, you believe your public to be."

Immediate cries of "Shame," good humouredly voiced, greeted his remarks.

The doctor raised a mildly deprecating hand and smiled faintly.

"It has been said many times that an author must believe in his story and 'live' each character, to have any chance of inducing his mood in his readers. Yet there appear to be factors in the vampire concept, which to say the least, are logically shaky."

Heads nodded, as Kemp's raised eyebrows posed the question.

"Here, we have the tradition of a creature of terrifying powers. Once it was human, has died and become undead—it wanders abroad during the dark hours between sunset and sunrise. It is almost unkillable. It feeds by taking the blood of its hapless victims, who eventually 'die,' only to rise, join the ranks of the undead and become vampires themselves preying on humanity."

The doctor was a compelling speaker, and in spite of their familiarity with his subject, his audience felt their flesh creep a little.

After a perfectly timed dramatic pause, Kemp continued speaking.

"There seems to be an obvious flaw here, which has either not occurred to the 'Bram Stokers,' or has been conveniently ignored by them.

"Surely one vampire will beget another, these two will produce two more, the four will multiply to eight, and so on. A widening ripple of metamorphosis in humanity must result, which would engulf us all in a few short years. In short, the world would soon be entirely populated by vampires, who presumably, would in turn die out—having eaten themselves out of house and home."

The slight tension which had grown during Kemp's concise exposition, was broken momentarily by the laughter which followed his use of the homely phrase.

Wisely, he allowed the mirth to subside before attempting to speak again.

"In spite of this logical difficulty, I think we have all been fascinated and gripped by the morbid 'reality' of Dracula."

Again heads nodded in agreement at the implied question.

"How can the impossible details of legend be resolved? Is there a logical reason why the geometrically progressive absurdity which I described would not occur? I know you will all be delighted to know that there is such a logical explanation available, an explanation grounded in solid, demonstrable fact.

"You will therefore, ladies and gentlemen, be able to continue to use vampires in your stories—if I gave you the impression that I was taking the bread out of your mouths, I apologise—I will now put it right back."

Enthusiastic applause broke out, while the doctor sipped from a glass of water.

The man of medicine now had a completely captive audience, waiting intriguedly to see if his further remarks would belie those which had already been made.

Doctor Basil Sawyer and I (Kemp said) had been in general practice as partners for about five years, in a small town whose name need not concern us now. He was, at fifty, about twenty years older than I, and was a native of the area.

I was taking evening surgery on the Friday after a Christmas which had really been white.

My waiting room that night, was, not unexpectedly, fuller than usual. The numbers had been swollen by a rash of post-festive season sufferers. Being a Friday, there were also those requiring clearance certificates to resume work the following week. It could have been worse though, because the three

inches of snow which had fallen, had kept away the regular visitors who came along merely for a gossip.

Steadily, the seats occupied grew less, as I dispensed advice, prescriptions, certificates and promises to visit the next day, until eventually the last patient went out through the door as Sawyer came in.

"Right, my lad," he said, hustling me into his consulting room, "you owe me ten bob, so pay up and look happy."

"Steady on," I replied, "you might at least sing some carols. What do I get for my money?"

He beamed at me expansively and struck a 'Sunday Night at the Palladium' pose.

"Mrs. Harris has beaten the clock, God bless her, and been presented with the jackpot, all nine pounds eight ounces of him to be exact. You bet me that she wouldn't make it in time this year, 'O ye of little faith.' Ten bob please."

"She didn't play fair," I demurred. "In theory there were six days to go."

Sawyer was still in an oracular mood. "Know you not that women were deceivers ever?"

He was still tucking the note lovingly into his wallet, when the phone rang.

I was halfway into my overcoat, so I let him answer it.

"Doctor Sawyer speaking . . . good evening Sir Humphrey . . . I'm sorry to hear that . . . Yes, yes, my partner and I will come immediately."

He looked at me. "I'm sorry about this Phil, you probably gathered that that was about Arnold Lawford. He's had a pretty bad turn; it may be the end for the poor devil. I'll have to call at the hospital en route and pick up a supply of blood. He rifled through the pages of his diary for confirmation of memory. "Type A, rhesus positive. Will you give me a hand with an emergency transfusion?"

"Of course," I said, "leukaemia sufferers need all the help they can get."

The dash across town over the treacherous roads and including the stop at the hospital blood bank, took only fifteen minutes, but it was fifteen minutes too long.

It was my first visit to Lawford Manor. Sir Humphrey was the current baronet of a line that went back to the fifteenth

century. The house itself was set back half a mile inside the entrance to the estate. Behind one wing, stood the private chapel with the crypt beneath containing the mortal remains of the family ancestors.

Sir Humphrey Lawford himself was waiting to take us to his son's room. While I paused irresolutely in the ancient hall, Sawyer brushed past and led the way up the staircase, taking them two at a time in his anxiety to reach his patient.

I followed as quickly as I could, carrying our equipment. It wasn't required, as I could see from my partner's manner.

He replaced the limp wrist gently on the cover, and motioned me closer.

I adjusted the beside lamp to shine on Arnold Lawford's face.

Shock! Pink-red eyes glittered back a reflection of the lamplight. The only other splotch of colour in the dead-white face, was that of the slack lips. The aureole of gossamer-fine, almost transparent hair, completed the picture—the man was a pure albino—the first one I had ever seen.

Pulling myself together, I checked for pulse, and tried with the stethoscope. There was no evidence that life remained. I closed the staring eyes and turned away.

Three days later, the body of Arnold Lawford was laid in the crypt with those of his ancestors.

Sawyer, while he had mentioned to me that Lawford had been his patient, had never said that the man was an albino—I suppose he thought that I knew all about it.

Albinos are among the unfortunates of nature's experiments—mutations for whom the sun's brightness is an intolerable glare forcing them into dark glasses if they have to venture out in daylight, running the gauntlet of actinic rays that bring to them not sun tan, but skin cancer. They are permitted their freedom only after sunset, or on dull, overcast days when the deadly luminosity has been reduced to bearable levels.

Arnold Lawford, I gathered, had rarely been outside the grounds of the estate. Most of his time had been spent reading in the massive library on the north side of the manor. In the evenings, he would walk quietly, and mostly alone, through the wood which covered a large part of the estate.

The frigid weather continued over the New Year. People broke bones and acquired bruises in falls, keeping my partner and me busy the whole time. It may be satisfying to cure the sick and the injured, but it is also exhausting, particularly so during the winter.

We had both been taking evening surgery for a day or two. The last person had left one night, and Sawyer brought out the bottle of Highland Dew presented to him by a Scottish member of our panel.

"Let's have a small one to keep out the cold when we go home," he said.

"Good idea," I said. "I was wondering when you were going to offer me a spot."

I hitched my chair nearer to his desk, watching idly as he poured the amber fluid into a couple of graduated glasses. Then I remembered the two small cigars in my breast pocket. Pulling them out, I peeled the cellophane from mine and laid the other on the desk for Sawyer.

"My contribution for the evening," I said.

Inevitably, the phone shrilled.

"I knew it," I moaned. "We should have gone while the going was good."

Sawyer was too old a hand to be perturbed.

"Better see what it is," he said.

I picked up the instrument, thinking harsh thoughts of Alexander Graham Bell for the umpteenth time.

Again our late caller was Sir Humphrey Lawford; he sounded very agitated. "Come over as quickly as you can, doctor. One of the maids has been injured and is hysterical."

"Keep her as quiet as you can, don't move her, and don't leave her," I said briefly. "And no stimulants please."

Replacing the phone in its cradle, I crooked a finger at my partner. "You can be my helper this time. Trouble at the Manor again."

"Right," he grunted, and downed his Scotch.

We donned our overcoats, picked up our emergency bags and hurried out to my car. Some more snow had fallen since I had parked it and this gave the tyres somewhat better traction for our drive to Lawford Manor.

A couple of gamekeepers carrying shotguns opened the big wrought iron gates for us to enter the estate, and then closed them securely behind us. They stayed in the porch of the

small lodge near the gates, like a couple of sentries on duty. This should have made us realise that something unusual had happened, but we drove on up the curving drive without giving any more thought to the silent guardians behind us.

The maid was lying on a settee in a small study off the hall. She was sobbing quietly, and looked terror-stricken despite the ministrations of Sir Humphrey and his housekeeper. One hand kept straying to the bandage around her throat, the fingers distractedly plucking at a position on the neck below the left side of the jaw. The ominous, spreading stain made it obvious why.

Sawyer took in the situation at a glance, the slight frown beginning to crease his forehead fading away almost before it was evident. After checking her pulse and administering a sedative, he gently removed the bandage. There was a ragged wound in the flesh surrounded by an elliptical bruise. Looking at it, I began to wonder how it had been caused.

The baronet and the housekeeper looked relieved when I asked them to leave while we gave the girl a local anaesthetic so that the injured tissue could be stitched. When the wound had been comfortably dressed, she looked a little more composed.

"Now Margaret," said Sawyer, "will you tell us what happened to cause this?"

The colour which had been creeping back into her cheeks, instantly receded, and she shuddered violently. Encouraged by the presence of the two of us however, she eventually whispered her story.

Returning from posting a letter, Margaret had been walking up the drive alone. An almost full moon had been shining after the snow had stopped falling, so that visibility was good. Rounding one of the curves about halfway up the drive, she had suddenly been confronted by a figure stepping out from behind a bush. Before she could move clear, she had been grasped by the wrists and forced to her knees. Almost fainting with pain and fright, the maid had stared up into the face of her attacker. Silhouetted as it was against the bright moon, no details of its features were discernable. The last memory she had before collapsing completely, was of a ghastly white blur descending and a searing pain near her throat. Margaret had regained consciousness, it seemed, after only a few moments. There was no sign of her assailant, and

scrambling to her feet, the girl had staggered to the Manor. She had been unable to give a coherent account of her ordeal until we had arrived.

Sir Humphrey, thinking she had been attacked by a dog, had instructed his gamekeepers to keep watch near the lodge while waiting to let us in.

I called the housekeeper back into the room, and drew Sawyer to one side. "What do you make of that?" I asked.

"Most people would give the easy answer and say hallucination," he replied, "but something attacked her and she seemed lucid enough to me. Suppose we walk back along her route, the answer may be there."

Accompanied by the baronet, we backtracked along Margaret's footprints in the soft snow. Although here and there our tyres had obscured them, it wasn't too difficult. Red patches on the snow and the vague outline where she had fallen, pinpointed the exact position of the struggle. Leading away from there, were footprints—*of bare feet*. Spread out on either side of the impossible outlines, we followed silently. At first, the indentations were clearly etched, but after about two hundred yards, they started to become less plain and eventually degenerated into roughly parallel furrows. The direction of the trail also changed. Where initially it had headed for the Manor, it now became erratic, veering first one way and then back. About a hundred yards from the Manor, the maker of the tracks had evidently fallen heavily. Around a flurried area in the snow, hand-prints showed for the first time. Three times more after this we located the sites of falls. The distance between consecutive ones became progressively shorter. Finally, there were no footprints, only a broad, dragging channel in the white crystals, flanked by scrabbling marks where hands had clawed for a hold.

We looked up, almost expecting to see someone. Ahead of us, the tortuous, snaking line led to the door of the crypt. It was ajar, the black oblong of the opening showing clearly in the light of the still bright moon.

Sir Humphrey put one hand into his overcoat pocket and brought out a revolver, whose outline glittered bluely. Without a word, he gestured to us with the weapon and strode towards the doorway. When he came abreast of it, his courage faltered

a little, and he opened the door wider, motioning for me to shine my torch inside.

Sprawling on the floor was a body. Spreadingeagled in its white shroud, it looked like an obscene, crooked starfish. I knew before we turned it over, that the filmy, silvery hair could only belong to Arnold Lawford. Frozen, dusky-red rivulets streaked his chin, the eyes were bulging open in an anguished, glazed stare.

Sawyer was as calm as he would have been at a street accident. Pushing the horror-stricken baronet firmly aside, he examined the body closely. After about five minutes, he straightened. "Let's take Sir Humphrey back into the Manor," he said.

We returned to the crypt after leaving the shaken baronet in his study with strict orders to speak to no-one. My partner was bent on an explanation and would be satisfied with nothing less than an immediate full-scale examination of the body.

I will not weary you with all the details of the gruesome hour we spent in solving the mystery. However, we established that Arnold Lawford's leukaemia was of a form unknown to medical science—Sawyer gave it the appellation 'leukaemia vampiris.' Its effect was to produce a deathlike catalepsy, during which, the stomach gradually altered to become capable of ingesting blood directly into the circulatory system Lawford's coffin, with its lid only lightly fastened, had been lowered into a shallow chamber in the floor, there to await the final closure by an inscribed marble slab. The chrysalis or dormant stage over, he had awakened to his new form of existence, and easily got out to seek a victim. His choice was unfortunate for Margaret, but utterly deadly for him. You see, there are four main blood groups ; Types A, B, AB and O. If a transfusion is given, *it must be from a similar group or from Group O*. Otherwise the result is invariably fatal in fairly short order. Lawford's blood group was A, that of the girl was B. The two types are mutually antagonistic.

We told Sir Humphrey all he needed to know, hushed the matter up as far as everyone else was concerned, and concocted a story of an unknown maniacal assailant who had made his escape. All the tell-tale tracks were obliterated in the heavy fall of snow which started as we were completing our examination of the vampire who was no longer undead.

Kemp abruptly terminated his story and sat down. The faces of his audience were pale and strained.

That old master of the horror yarn, Garret Tremayne, came to his feet and said, looking all around the table : " I think that proves once and for all, that truth is indeed stranger than fiction."

There were no dissenters to his opinion, although Philip Kemp still had a last word to say.

" I'm glad you liked my story, because having convinced you of its authenticity, I must now confess that it is completely fictional. I like fantasy as much as you do, but I like it plausible also—may I hereby apply for membership of your Club ?"

Their verdict was a forgone conclusion.

—Steve Hall

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BOOK REVIEWS

Fantasy and Macabre

The Incomplete Enchanter, L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt (Pyramid, 40¢). A re-issue of the first delightful Harold Shea adventure in the land of the Norse Gods.

The Castle Of Iron, L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, (Pyramid, 40¢). A welcome companion volume to the above, continuing Harold Shea's adventures, this time in the magic world of Merlin and the Fairie Queen.

Dwellers In The Mirage, A Merritt, (Paperback Library, 50¢). The perennial classic from the 1932 era. Required reading for the newcomer and a nostalgic revival for the old-timer.

Little Fuzzy, H. Beam Piper, (Avon, 40¢). Listed as science fiction but really more of the wacky off-beat variety. Mr. Piper, being a competent top-rank author gets away with a plot most authors would fall down on.

The October Country, Ray Bradbury, (Ballantine, 50¢). Back in print after too-long an absence, this magnificent collection of 19 short stories, 15 of them written before the Young Master was twenty-five years old and every one a gem—although some are far brighter than others. Like "The Small Assassin," and "Homecoming." If you haven't anything of Bradbury's on the shelf other than his science fiction, this one is a must.

Nine Horrors And A Dream, Joseph Payne Brennan, (Ballantine, 35¢). A total of ten nightmare stories, four from latter-day *Weird Tales*, to whose memory Mr. Brennan dedicates the book, and rightly so. Note too, that the author is an authority on Lovecraft.

Shadows With Eyes, Fritz Leiber, (Ballantine, 35¢). This collection of six shorts are in the vein of the Leiber we know so well, with dark overtones of the macabre reminiscent of the background to his earlier novels *Gather Darkness !* and *Night's Black Agents*.

Alone By Night, Edited by Michael and Don Congdon. (Ballantine, 35¢). Eleven off-beat macabre stories of vintage quality, including two Robert Bloch tales—"Sweets To The Sweet" and "Enoch"—Kuttner's "A Gnome There Was," a "Saki" werewolf plum, "Gabriel-Ernest," a Matheson, "Nightmare At 20,000 Feet," plus others. Not as good as the outstanding *Tales Of Love And Horror* previously edited.

Science Fiction

Telepath, Arthur Sellings, (Ballantine, 50¢). First novel from this accomplished short story writer, written in what can best be termed as the "prosaic English style" and reminiscent of Wyndham at his best. The title explains the plot, but here is no world-shaking disaster or battle between homo sapiens and homo superior, but the slow, almost casual, build-up of awareness in the mind of the world's first human with latent but limited powers. A frantic, almost desperate search for a kindred mind—and the terrifying impact of discovery. A first-class novel.

Naked To The Stars, Gordon R. Dickson, (Pyramid, 40¢). A cleverly contrived 'soldiers of space' novel which could be the reverse side of the coin depicted in the controversial Heinlein novel *Starship Troopers*. This one, also, you make up your own mind about. Either way, a fine novel.

Other Worlds Of Clifford Simak, (Avon 50¢). Six stories from the hard cover *The Worlds of Clifford Simak*, five from *Galaxy* and one from *Infinity*. Regular magazine readers will want to miss this one but for the casual reader a good selection by one of today's leading writers.

The Stainless Steel Rat, Harry Harrison, (Pyramid, 40¢) A swashbuckling space adventure story in the best Harrison tradition, based on material originally published in *Analog*.

The Voices Of Time, J. G. Ballard, (Berkley, 50¢). Seven of Jim Ballard's earlier short stories, five from *New Worlds Science Fiction* and two from *Science Fantasy*, most of which will be fresh to American readers. Included in the selection is the incomparable "The Sound Sweep" from this magazine. Damon Knight on Ballard states, "... the freshest new talent in science fiction since Brian Aldiss."

Hospital Station, James White, (Ballantine, 50¢). The early chronicles of "Sector General" space hospital originally published in *New Worlds Science Fiction*, now put together as a continuous narrative. The best piece of fiction on futuristic medicine yet written.

The Alley God, Philip Jose Farmer, (Ballantine, 50¢). Three long novelettes, "The Alley Man," from *Beyond*, "The Captain's Daughter," from *F&SF*, "The God Business," from *Science Fiction Plus*."

Worlds Of When, edited by Groff Conklin, (Pyramid, 40¢) five short novels, "Death and the Senator," by Arthur C. Clarke (*Analog*), "Bullet With His Name," by Fritz Leiber (*Galaxy*), "Transfusion," by Chad Oliver (*Astounding*), "Farmer," by Mack Reynolds (*Galaxy*), "Rations Of Tantalus," by Margaret St. Clair (*Fantastic Universe*).

Player Piano, Kurt Vonnegut, (Mayflower, 3/6). For British readers who missed the hard-cover edition some years ago—a must. One of the top satires about an automated future yet written.

Planet Of The Dreamers, John D. Macdonald (Corgi, 2/6). A delicately handled novel of Man's race to the stars and of the strange world of the Dreamers.

—John Carnell



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